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BIG-BOOK WESTERN

MAGAZINE



A FIGHTING MAN RIDES HOME

FEATURE-LENGTH WESTERN EPIC

by WAYNE D. OVERHOLSER

FRONTIER FICTION by TOPNANO AUTHORS!

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MAGAZINE



A FIGHTING MAN RIDES HOME

FEATURE-LENGTH WESTERN EPIC

by **WAYNE D. OVERHOLSER**

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MOST ANY
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Vol. 31, No. 1

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Cry
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Chance



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Turn Back The
Hands Of Time
The Little White
Cloud That Cried
Charmaine
Anytime
Jealousy
Shrimp Boats
Be My Life's
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18 HILL BILLY HITS

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Bless and Keep
You



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Give Me More,
More, More
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Always Late
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Way
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Mom And Dad's
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Soldiers
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Church In The
Wildwood
In The Garden
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The Blood
Leaning On The
Everlasting Arm
Since Jesus Came
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Trust On Me
Jesus Keep Me Near
The Cross
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SUCKERS' GOLD-RUSH

By **JOHN T. LYNCH**

ABNER GILMAN could see no reason to continue working sixteen hours a day on his father's Connecticut farm, when every man who went out to California in that year of 1849 was getting rich. All they did was merely reach down and pick up gold nuggets.

Ab arrived in New York with \$600. It had been quite a struggle to scrape up this sum, even though his relatives chipped in what they could spare. They were casting their bread upon the waters—certain it would return in the form of golden cake. Especially when they got this letter:

You will be surprised I am still in New York. But when I got here I was lucky to meet a agent who knows what a man needs in Californy. He will see I am outfitted right for the gold feelds. A lot of these fellers are gettin on ships with no equipment. But not me. The agent says I can get the right stuff for three hundred dollers, right on the New York wharf. So please send me this much more. My steemer fare to Chagres is \$150. Across the Isthmus of Pannymaw by canoe is \$20. From Pannymaw to San Francisco is \$250. In all this is \$420. I already got my ticket. The \$300 more is for what I need for gold gathering. Namely:

One gold machine that is garanteed to seperate the gold dust with no water and hardly any work.

One bellows. With this, I just point it at the ground and blow the dirt away. It leaves nothin but clean gold lyn there.

One shovel with a notch in the bowl. The notch catches the nuggets.

Also I got to buy plenty of canned food and medicine and glass beads to trade the Indians for gold dust. Pleeese send this money right away so we can get rich soon.

Abner

(Continued on page 8)

NOW, the pipe smoker's dream come true!

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The ideal pipe for the STEADY SMOKER, the NEW SMOKER and the man who doesn't like an ordinary pipe.



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They'd damned him for a kill-crazy lobo, a trigger-quick outcast on the prod. But they were fast and loud to beg for his guts and his guns, when all hell ripped loose in Twin Lakes Valley!

Man Rides Home

By WAYNE D. OVERHOLSER



Something prodded him in the small of the back as Kitsie said,
"Get your hands up, brother!"

CHAPTER 1

Prodigal's Return

LANCE MARKHAM topped Stinking Water Pass shortly after noon and had his first look at Twin Lakes Valley in two years. He'd been riding east the last time he'd seen it, a sour and bitter kid who had considered himself a man. Now he knew his standard of measure-

ment had been wrong—a quick gun and handy fists are not enough to make a man out of a kid. He knew, too, that it took more than a change of scenery to bring peace of mind when the one thing he wanted was here in the valley.

The day he'd left had been much like this day, hot and still, with the dust and forest fires of early fall making the Blue Mountains a little hazy to the north and blotting Agate City from his sight. He could barely make out the lakes far to the southwest; he could not see the fence that separated the big Star K from the little ranches that had somehow survived on the hardscrabble range that made up the north half of the valley. Now, taking time to roll and fire a cigarette, he was surprised how vividly this picture had fastened itself upon his mind.

He rode on down the twisting road, holding his bay gelding to a walk. He wanted to talk to Nora Seeley before he saw anyone else, and the best way to do that was to reach the schoolhouse just after four. If he had any luck at all, he'd catch Nora before she left.

Funny, he thought, how time changes a man. Two years ago he had been glad to get out of the valley where he had been raised, glad to get away from Nora and his brother Dave. It hadn't bothered him when his father had slapped a mortgage on the Rafter M so he'd have money to start somewhere else.

But it had been a mistake, all of it. You didn't get what you wanted by going off and leaving it, not when it was a woman like Nora Seeley that you'd been in love with ever since you'd sat behind her in school and dipped her braids in the ink well.

When he was a quarter of a mile from town, he saw the children leave the schoolhouse, scattering like a flock of scared quails. He crossed the bridge that spanned Mustang Creek, his horse's hoofs sounding with pistol-sharpness on the planks, and he

remembered how it was when he'd been in school. Four o'clock had been the best hour of the day.

The town, such as it was, lay west of the schoolhouse, its wide, dusty street deserted. Lance turned off the road and crossed the school yard. He reined up and dismounted, hoping that Nora wasn't keeping any slow pupils after school. He wanted to know how he stood after two years, wanted to know what her letter had meant. She hadn't even said whether she was still engaged to Dave.

He hesitated before going in, thinking back across the years to the wasted hours he had spent inside this tiny, white schoolhouse. He had heard people talk about childhood being the best part of their lives, but he couldn't say that. He wasn't that big a liar. Bad grades, whippings, his fights with Curly Wilkes: all of it because he had instinctively rebelled against authority.

He went in hesitantly, pausing just inside the door. Nora was at her desk, and a red-headed kid was sitting in front of her, laboriously struggling with a stubby pencil on a piece of scratch paper.

Nora's head was bent. The slanting afternoon sunlight that fell through a west window touched her chestnut hair with scarlet. Suddenly she felt his presence and glanced up; she breathed, "Lance," and her blue eyes were wide with surprise.

He took off his Stetson, wiping a hand across his short, brown hair, and grinned at her. "Howdy, Nora."

She rose, a small, slender girl in a dark blue dress that had been cut to give her the demure and retiring appearance that Agate City liked in its teacher. But it was a lie, a veneer hiding the warm woman's ardor that was in her. Now, looking at her, Lance wondered if his brother Dave had ever broken through that veneer.

Nora said in a low tone, "That's enough for tonight, Rusty. You can go."

The kid jumped up as if a bolt of lightning had struck him. He jammed the pa-

per, pencil, and arithmetic book into the desk and went past Lance like a streak. He let out a whoop as he cleared the door and raced around the building toward the shed.

"I reckon kids don't change," Lance said, grinning. "The redhead could have been me."

"Pete Roby's boy," Nora said. "He's smart, but he's ornery."

"Like Pete," Lance said.

She nodded. "A lot like Pete."

"He still could have been me," Lance said. "About ten years ago."

She smiled. "Are you sure you were smart?"

"Well, I never had a pretty teacher. Old men or dumpy battle-axes with good right arms. How do you make out?"

"I don't have a good right arm, if that's what you mean. You see, it's all in the way you handle children." She pursed her lips, eyes moving down his lanky frame and coming back to his weather-darkened face. "But maybe I've been lucky. I never had to battle a boy like you."

"You've always battled me. Remember?"

She moved to the end of her desk and stood there, one hand upon it. She said gravely, "How could I forget?"

THEY were silent a moment. Then Lance strode down the aisle between the double desks to her and took her left hand. He turned it over. The diamond ring Dave had bought for her in Canyon City was gone.

"We broke up a long time ago," she said. "We weren't meant for each other. I guess I knew it all the time."

"You waited for me," he said. "Don't tell me any different."

He caught her to him and kissed her. She resisted him, her body tense, small fists pounding his chest; then the resistance fled from her and her lips were sweet and hungry. The empty years might never have been; the flame had never gone out. It was as if they were kids again, crazy with love for each other.

When he let her go, he said, "You see? We'll get married tomorrow."

She moved away from him and went back to her chair behind the desk. She sat down and began rubbing a hand back and forth across the smooth varnished surface, staring blankly at it. She said tonelessly, "No, Lance."

He couldn't believe he'd heard her right. He cried out, "You lied to Dave, but you can't lie to me. You never stopped loving me."

"I—I don't know," she said miserably. "I shouldn't have written to you. I was hoping you'd changed, that we could just be friends."

"You never thought anything of the kind," he said roughly. "You wrote for me to come back. You said I was needed here. Who in hell would need me but you?"

"A lot of people. Your dad and Dave and my dad, even if he doesn't know it. I need you, too, but not in the way you want it." She looked up at him, her eyes defiant. "I used to hate your fights and your temper and the crazy, wild things you did, but I don't now. That's what we need—somebody with a temper who's wild and crazy enough to fight." She motioned to the walnut-butted .44 on his hip. "We need that gun, Lance."

He sat down on one of the double desks, shocked by what she had said. Every quarrel they'd had had been over the fights he'd got into. Not once had he brought her to a dance or a party or even into town on a Saturday afternoon without having a fight with someone, usually Curly Wilkes. It was those fights which had finally made them break up and had turned her to Dave, who was steady and hard-working.

"I don't savvy," he said. "You just got done saying you hoped I'd changed."

"I meant about me." She pounded the desk with her fists, suddenly angry. "Everything else has changed, Lance. You won't know your home. Dave's married. He's not the Dave you remember."

He sat there, looking at her. She was the only one he had written to, and she had never written to him except the one short note asking him to come back. Now a sick feeling crawled into his belly as he looked at her pale, taut face. He had been so sure she'd sent for him because she wanted him. But it hadn't been that at all.

"Who to?" he asked finally.

"A show girl named Kitsie Bannerman, but that wasn't what I was going to . . ." She stopped, looking past him at someone who had come in. She smiled and rose. "George, Lance is back!"

"So I see," a man said.

Lance got up and turned. He said coldly, "Howdy, Brett."

George Brett gave him a short nod. "Howdy, Markham. Visiting or staying?" "Staying."

Turning, Brett tossed his cigar into the yard, a casual gesture designed to show Lance that it didn't make any difference either way. He was a stocky man with a square head set on a short, thick neck and he had lived in the valley as long as Lance had. He owned the Agate City store and ran the post office. He was the one man in town who had money.

Swinging back, Brett laid his bold eyes on Lance. "You didn't like it here two years ago. I'm surprised you'd think you will now."

"Maybe I was smart enough to learn a few things after I left," Lance said.

"I doubt that." Brett came along the aisle, his bald head shiny in the sunlight. "I loaned your dad two thousand, and you stuck it in your pocket and pulled out with it. It's a fair guess that you're broke and have come back for more money. You won't get it. I can tell you that right now."

Lance had never liked Brett and now he discovered he liked him even less than he thought he did. Two years ago he would have knocked a handful of teeth out of the man's mouth, but today he only said, "You're wrong, Brett."

"But you are broke, ain't you?"

"My business."

"Maybe. And maybe not. I like John Markham. Always have. That's why I loaned him the money when he wanted it. Well, I still hold the mortgage on the Rafter M, so it might be that the reason for your coming back is a little bit my business."

"No," Lance said. "Not any."

"All right," Brett turned his back to Lance. "I want to talk to you, Nora."

"George is the chairman of the school board, Lance," Nora said. "Will you excuse us a minute?"

"Sure," Lance said, and walked back along the aisle.

He stopped beside the seat he'd used his last year in school, grinning when he saw the initials, LM, were still there. He had carved them with his pocket knife and had got the licking of his life because of it. He remembered, too, that Curly Wilkes had sat across the aisle from him, a handy target for spit wads.

He was vaguely aware of the low talk from the other end of the room. He looked around. Brett was leaning across the desk and Nora was shaking her head. If it was school business, it was none of his put-in.

LANCE glanced at the desk in front of the one where he'd sat, at the deep pencil lines marking the boundary between the two pupils who had been desk pardners, and he thought of the love letter he'd handed Nora. The teacher had caught it and read it before the class. Curly had laughed so hard he'd fallen out of his seat, and that recess Lance had blacked his eye.

Curly had been in love with Nora, too. The boys had been thirteen and Nora twelve, and most of their fights were over her. She'd been a fine-featured, pretty girl, the prettiest in the school. Suddenly Lance wheeled toward the door and went outside.

Every boy in the valley had been in love with Nora, but Lance had always had the edge on the others. Except for a few

casual dates, Curly had never got anywhere with her, and he'd blamed Lance for it. She could have had her choice of a dozen, but she jumped from one to another, always coming back to Lance.

Finally old Bill Seeley had forbidden Lance to come to the ranch to see her. Time Nora was getting married, old Bill had said. She needed a steady man, not a hell-raiser who went from one mess of trouble into another.

Lance rolled a smoke, lighted it, and took a single pull. The taste was bitter to his tongue. He threw the cigarette into the yard, thinking of his last quarrel with Nora at a dance here in Agate City. Nora had gone home with Dave. The next morning Dave told Lance he was going to Canyon City to buy a ring. Nora had promised to marry him.

Lance couldn't stay in the valley after that. He told his dad he was leaving, and that afternoon John Markham had ridden into town and borrowed the two thousand from George Brett. He said for Lance to use it to get a start somewhere else, and Lance had taken it.

At the time it had seemed right. That was another thing time did; it swept a man along like a merciless, cold current, changing him and teaching him if he was smart enough to learn. Now he knew it had been wrong to take the money. He'd been selfish as hell, and that was the size of it.

Brett came out of the schoolhouse, the muscles in his face set hard. He faced Lance, his hands shoved into his pants pockets. He said, "Nora tells me she sent for you. That puts a different light on things. Come down to the store. I want to talk to you."

"Go to hell," Lance said.

"That's probably where I'll go, trying to do something for somebody else, but I'm doing it anyhow. I've got a proposition that'll interest you."

"I reckon not," Lance said.

"I think it will. I'll expect you."

The storeman walked past Lance, crossed the school yard, and went down the street. When Lance turned toward the door, he saw that Nora was standing there, frowning, her eyes on him.

The drab dress did not suit her, he thought absently. Or maybe she wasn't as pretty as he remembered. She looked older than she should, with tiny lines around her eyes; older and unhappy, as if life had rushed past her and somehow torn out of her grip the one thing she wanted.

"Go see George," she said in a low tone. "Please, Lance."

He walked to her, not understanding this and remembering again the feeling his kiss had aroused in her. He said, "I came back for you, but I don't have anything to offer you. I'm flat broke, just like Brett said."

"It doesn't matter. I mean, it's got nothing to do with you and me." She gripped the door jamb, her eyes holding him away from her. "Lance, I'm going to marry George."

She might as well have picked up a club and struck him in the stomach. He stood motionless, looking at her, his lungs aching for breath. He said in a low tone, "He ain't no better for you than Dave was. I'll kill him before I'll let you marry him."

"No you won't, Lance." She shook her head. "That's not the way. I need this job and the valley needs George. Go see what he wants. Maybe you can help."

So it was money after all, and he was broke. Two thousand dollars gone down a rat hole that would have helped if he had it. He said, "All right, I'll go see him. Looks like there's something going on around here I don't know about. But when you stand up in front of a preacher beside George Brett, remember that I love you and you love me and nothing will ever change the way we feel."

He wheeled and walked to his horse, and when he mounted, he saw that she had gone inside.

CHAPTER 2

Job for a Hellion

A MAN could reach into his mind for good memories, the good sweet memories of hours he'd like to live again. Dances, parties, house raisings, revival meetings when Lance's mind had been more on Nora than it should have been. And picnics beside Mustang Creek with tall pines all around them and the clatter of the creek in their ears, running fast and cool up there in the mountains before it reached the valley to become a meandering, stagnant stream.

Two crazy kids in love with each other, her slim body pressed against his, her lips warm and responding, the sky and the pine branches seen through her hair. Two kids who hadn't given a damn or what-the-hell for anything but themselves.

Maybe old Bill Seeley had known about those picnics. Maybe that was why he'd given Lance his walking papers, and after that Lance had to see Nora on the sly, sneaking around as if he were guilty of something.

Other memories that he wished he could forget, ugly memories of his bitter quarrels with Nora and angry words that should never have been said. She'd been ashamed of him, she'd told him, because he couldn't stay out of fights. But it hadn't been altogether that. He'd understood it after he'd left the valley.

They were both too strong-willed, and neither had been willing to back up. Both had wanted to bend the other when bending was impossible. Finally he had hurt her with the things he'd said, and because she had wanted to hurt him in return, she had left him that night at the dance and asked Dave to take her home. She'd wangled a proposal out of Dave—Dave who had never really loved anyone but himself. But it hadn't lasted.

Now, riding along Main Street and rein-

ing up in front of Brett's store, Lance realized he had known all the time that Nora's engagement to Dave couldn't last. For two years he'd fought the urge to come back, to tell her he'd been wrong and she could have her way in every little picayune thing she wanted. But his pride had not let him. Not until she'd sent for him. Now the knowledge that he'd waited too long lay upon his mind like a great, depressing weight.

He stepped down and tied his horse, not feeling the hot, bright sunlight on his back. He had no room in his mind for anything but Nora. She wasn't married yet. Maybe he wasn't too late. Even if she had been married, it might not be too late. George Brett was mortal. He could die the same as any man.

Lance went into the store and stood just inside the door, letting his eyes become accustomed to the gloom as he searched for Brett. Mingled store smells came to him, of lard and leather and dry goods and onions and a dozen other staples, and he wondered how any man with an ounce of guts in his belly could stand to work here.

"So you're back!"

It was Curly Wilkes' voice from somewhere deep in the gloomy interior of the store. Then Lance saw him behind the counter, his hands on the scarred top. Lance moved toward Wilkes, suddenly cautious.

The kid days were behind them, and with those days had gone the crazy, senseless fistfights that had often started for no good reason except that neither had ever really proved he was a better man than the other. Looking at Wilkes' taunting face, it came to Lance that the proving time was here, but it would be with guns and not fists.

"Yeah, I'm back," Lance said. Wilkes hadn't changed except that his green eyes were a little greener and glassier, his long mouth longer and down-slanting at the corners. "I'm staying this time, Curly."

"I reckon you are," Wilkes breathed.

"I reckon you'll be staying—permanent."

His right hand had dropped to his side. There would be a gun under the counter, Lance thought. Wilkes knew as well as he did that they would never fight again as they used to—punching until they were so tired that neither could swing a punishing fist and exhaustion rather than victory had stopped them. Suddenly Lance caught the significance of Wilkes standing behind the counter with a white floursack tied around his middle. He was working for Brett.

"Well, I'll be damned," Lance breathed. "You turned out to be a counter jumper!"

A red stain worked its way across Wilkes' cheeks. He said, "It's honest work, Lance. Can you say as much?"

"I ain't in jail," Lance said.

"Maybe you ought to be. Anyhow, I never took two thousand dollars from my dad and pulled out with it while he—"

"Curly!" Brett came out of his office in the rear of the building. "I told you to behave. Come on back, Lance."

Shrugging, Wilkes raised his right hand and slapped it palm-down beside his left. "Yeah, go on back, Lance. Plenty of time if you don't get scared and light a shuck out of here."

"Ever see me scared?"

A small grin curled the corners of Wilkes' mouth. "I will if you stick around."

"Don't count on it," Lance said, and walked past the mail rack into Brett's office.

BRETT stepped aside and closed the door behind Lance. He said, "Sit down," and moved across the room to the window and stood looking across the level floor of the valley. "Lance, for the time being I want you to forget your feud with Curly. You're going to find yourself on the same side, and neither one of you will get anywhere trying to kill the other."

Lance sat down on a rawhide-bottom chair and stretched his long legs in front of him. He had never been in Brett's office before, and he had often wondered

about it. Now it seemed disappointing for a man who had money: just a desk, a couple of chairs, and the big safe in the corner. Brett had the only safe in the county, and he often accommodated his customers by keeping their cash in it because there was no bank closer than Canyon City. He kept his own money there, too, although no one but George Brett himself knew how much of it there was.

Brett stood with his back to Lance, big hands shoved inside his waistband. Lance said, "I didn't come in because you told me to. I came in to tell you something."

"Go ahead," Brett said.

"You ain't marrying Nora. She's still in love with me and I think you know it."

"Yes, I know it. But she'll marry me, and I'll make her a better husband than you ever would."

"You'd marry her, knowing she loves me?"

"That's right," Brett said without turning. "Love is for children. Let's not fog up our minds about it. I can take care of her. That's what counts, and in time she'll forget about you."

Lance took a deep breath. "Then I've just got one thing to say. I'll kill you before I'll let you ruin her life!"

"Later," Brett said irritably. "Come here, Lance."

Not once had Brett bothered to turn around. Lance's threat had bounced off him like a pebble against a tin roof.

Lance rose and walked to the window, puzzled. George Brett had never achieved a reputation for courage. But courage, Lance knew, sometimes ran in peculiar channels. Perhaps Brett's had never been tested. Glancing at the side of his face, Lance saw that it was as expressionless as a wall of the room.

"Take a look yonder," Brett said. "Tell me what you see."

Lance stared through the window. Not far south of the town was the barbed-wire fence that separated the big Star K from the

rest of the valley. Lance saw a Star K buckaroo on the other side of the fence, riding slowly as if inspecting the fence. The lakes lying a mile or more farther south were not visible from the window.

"I see what you do," Lance said. "Or maybe you're seeing something I can't."

"I see a hell of a lot more. Remember Ross Kirk?"

Lance glanced again at Brett's face, still unable to read what the man was feeling. Anyone who had been raised in the valley would not forget Ross Kirk of the Star K. Lance had been ten when Kirk had driven his herd north from Nevada and forced the valley ranchers off their places around the lake. He'd had a U. S. marshal to back him up, so no one had resisted.

Kirk had bought a swamp land grant of fifty thousand acres from the state of Oregon, the only really good grass in the valley, and he'd made it stick, although most of the land he'd bought had not been swamp even by the broadest interpretation of the word.

"Yeah, I ain't likely to forget him," Lance said, thinking of his mother who had died within a year from the time they'd moved, disappointed and heartbroken, and of his father who had somehow managed to survive in the barren north half of the valley.

Brett swung away from the window and sat down behind his desk. "You'll forget your feud with Curly and your feeling about Nora and your threat against my life. At least you'll forget them until our trouble is settled or we're busted—which is what Ross Kirk wants." He nodded at the rawhide-bottom chair. "Sit down and listen."

Lance moved back to the chair and sat down. He had the feeling that behind the expressionless mask that Brett wore there was real worry in the man. That surprised him because he had always supposed Brett was the one man north of the fence who

had no cause to worry about making out.

"Speak your piece," Lance said, "though I ain't sure I'll forget all them things."

"You will if you give a damn about your dad." Brett drew a cigar from his pocket and lighted it. "One thing before I start. If we lose, we all lose and I'm broke. I could not take care of Nora under those circumstances and your chance with her would be better than mine. You might throw in with Kirk just to get an excuse to kill me. If you do, your dad will lose the Rafter M. So would Nora's dad and the rest of them."

"Damn your soul!" Lance said hotly. "You know I wouldn't do that."

"Good." Brett leaned back and blew out a plume of smoke. "It was thirteen years ago when it happened. You were a small boy, but you may remember how it was I had a town on the bench above the lake. I lost it when the other boys lost their spreads. Then I moved here and started Agate City. About half of our people left the valley, but those of us who stayed have made a living."

"Of sorts," Lance said.

Brett nodded. "Of sorts. Well, I've always considered myself a friend to your dad and his neighbors. I've loaned them money and given them credit at the store. I've dealt with them honestly and fairly because I believe in honesty and fairness, but I've never been loved and I have never loved anyone, for the reason I mentioned a while ago. Love is for children. Now, when you left here, you were a damn-fool kid bogged down with childish emotions. Today I'm offering you a job because I think you're a man."

BRETT leaned back in his chair, staring at the ceiling as he pulled on his cigar. In the silence, a clock on the top of the safe ticked away with loud, metallic explosions of sound. This was crazy, Lance thought, and then knew it wasn't. Whatever Brett's faults were, being crazy

was not one of them. He was a machine like the clock on the safe.

"Maybe I ain't a man the way you figure," Lance said. "I can't sit here and forget the way I feel about Nora."

"We won't talk about her. I just want to know if you'll take the job I'm offering you for one hundred dollars a month, your first month's wages paid in advance."

"I'm still listening," Lance said.

"I've always been interested in what makes people do what they do," Brett said tonelessly. "Mostly it's ambition or pride. Or maybe a sort of hypnotism that comes from some strong feeling. Like the way you hate Curly. But Kirk puzzles me. After sitting for thirteen years on his side of the fence, all of a sudden he's hell-bent on grabbing our half of the valley."

"You want me to go after him?"

"No." Brett brought his swivel chair down with a bang, his eyes coming to Lance's face. "We've been plagued by two things—drouth which has damned near ruined our range, and hard times. We haven't marketed a steer since you've left the valley, but prices are coming up and we could profitably drive a herd to Ontario this fall if we had any cattle to drive. That's your job. Find out what's happening to our beef."

"If you're trying to tell me Kirk is rustling—"

"I'm not telling you anything. I don't know, but I do know I've loaned so much money I can't buy a year's supplies for the store. The boys tell me their cattle're disappearing. I've got a notion Kirk has hired some of our people to do the job. Find out who it is."

"Got any ideas?"

Brett nodded. "The only rancher on our side of the fence who didn't settle with the rest of us on the lake is Pete Roby. He quit the Star K, claiming he couldn't stomach Kirk any longer, but I think he's lying. Just a hunch and no proof."

Lance rolled a cigarette, remembering

the talk about Roby when he had left Kirk and bought the Big 9. A tough, the north valley people said, a gunslinger. They had never neighbored with him because they had suspected him just as Brett was doing now, but Lance had never been sure the suspicions were justified.

"Why me?" Lance asked.

"You had a reputation for being wild when you left. I think Roby might listen if you propositioned him right." Brett fingered the ash from his cigar. "There's another reason, too. I think your brother Dave is into it up to his neck."

Lance had sealed the cigarette and started to put it between his lips. He froze, his hand halfway up to his mouth, staring at Brett who was leaning forward, big hands clenched on his desk.

"I knew it would be hard for you to believe," Brett said, "but you haven't met his wife. She's changed him. She could change anything or anybody. She'd make a mountain sweat if she smiled at it long enough." Brett rose. "Will you take the job, knowing what it may do to Dave?"

Lance lowered his hand, crushing the cigarette in it. "I'll take it," he said.

Brett lifted a wallet from his pocket, counted out ten gold eagles, and slid them across the desk. "Nobody will know of our arrangement but you and me and Nora. It was her idea, and I think it's a good one, because you're the only man who can go out to the Rafter M and look around without making Dave suspicious. If you get any proof, report back to me."

Lance picked up the money and rose. "It'll have to be damned good proof before I report anything back to you."

Brett said, "Nora and I are both counting on you."

Lance left the office. Wilkes was putting cans on the shelves, his back to Lance. Brett called from the office door, "Curly, you're fired the first time I hear of you starting any trouble with Lance. You hear?"

Wilkes said sullenly, "I hear," and kept on placing cans on the shelves.

LANCE paused when he was opposite Wilkes. For a moment he fought his pride; then it seemed to him it was not important. Brett had been right. There was no room for a kid feud if trouble had come to the valley as Brett had said.

"Maybe we oughta bury the hatchet," Lance said.

Wilkes turned, his face heavy with resentment. "So you've got George on your side."

Brett stalked along the counter. "I told Lance you two were on the same side. That's the way it's got to be."

Wilkes raised a hand to his cheek and felt of the crescent-shaped scar Lance had given him the last time they'd fought. He said slowly, "All right, Lance, I'll bury the hatchet—right in your skull the first chance I get."

Lance shook his head at Brett. "Let it go, George."

He went on along the counter toward the street door, pausing there as another man came in. It was Pete Roby, a stubby man with an ugly, taciturn face. Now it brightened as he recognized Lance. He held out his hand, saying, "Glad to see you, Markham."

Lance shook hands with him, wondering at the friendliness the man showed. "Glad to be back, Roby," he said.

Roby nodded and went on into the store. He said, "George, I've got to have some salt and sugar and flour."

"No credit," Brett said harshly. "Not to you."

"Listen, George," Roby said. "It ain't just for me. I've got a sick wife and I've got a boy. In another month I'll be driving some steers to Ontario, and with prices coming up, I can pay you back, but my wife and kid can't wait."

"No credit," Brett said again, and swung back into the office, slamming the door.

Wilkes grinned like a satisfied tomcat. "You heard the boss, Roby. Get your mangy carcass out of here."

Roby walked out, his shoulders sagging. Lance watched him cross the walk, untie his horse, and step up. He had always admired Roby for his toughness and independent spirit. The man had never asked for anything from the time he'd left the Star K and bought the Big 9.

A sudden impulse made Lance follow him. He called, "Pete."

Roby reined up and sat staring at Lance, who came to stand beside his horse. He said, "It's all right, Lance. You can't beat a stacked deck. Hell, I should have known."

Lance handed him a gold eagle. "Don't tell Brett where you got it. Come back in a day or so and show him the color of your money."

Roby hesitated; then he took the coin and shoved it into his pants pocket. "A lot of folks figure you wrong, Lance," he said in a tired voice. "Well, you never know about a man." He swallowed, and added defensively, "I wouldn't take it if my wife . . ."

"Forget it. You worked for Kirk a long time, didn't you?"

"Yeah." Roby eyed him warily. "Why?"

"I remember the day you rode into the valley," Lance said. "You were rodding a bunch of Kirk's buckaroos and you told us to vamose. I was purty small, but it's something you don't forget. You were as tough as all hell."

"Anybody can be tough when he's got a dozen men backing him," Roby said. "I guess that's the trouble with everybody up here; they remember me the same as you have. I was just carrying out Kirk's orders."

"Looks like you'd have known how folks would feel."

"I wasn't bright," Roby said. "I figured that quitting Kirk would be enough."

"I've been wondering what sort of a

hairpin Kirk is." Lance scratched his nose. "Suppose he's got any idea of taking over this half of the valley?"

"Hell no," Roby said, surprised. Then he frowned as if it were a new thought to him. "He might, at that, if he figured he could. The way it is, he's cut off from the mountains and he could use our summer range."

"Looks like we might have a fight on our hands," Lance said. "Well, I've got to ride. Ain't been home yet."

"So long," Roby said, and left town at a gallop.

CHAPTER 3

His Brother's Wife

LANCE took his time tightening his cinch. He looked along the familiar street, remembering that it was Brett's town. The storekeeper had built the saloon, hotel, livery stable and blacksmith shop, and he still owned the buildings, renting them out to other men who had gradually drifted into the valley.

As Brett had said, he would go down with the little ranchers, for all of his business came from them. Ross Kirk and his buckaroos never crossed the line, and no one was permitted to come through the gate in the fence from the north except Brett, who carried the Star K mail to the big house on the lake once a week.

Lance had covered hundreds of miles the last two years; he had passed through more towns than he could count. Now it struck him that Agate City was a piddling, tawdry place, and it would never be anything else. Before he'd left the valley, he had not thought about it because he had nothing to compare Agate City with. Now he did, and as he swung his bay away from the hitch pole, he found himself wondering why Brett stayed here.

He rode north the way Roby had gone, hoping he would see Nora on her way

home, but she was not in sight. Roby had disappeared; a cloud of white dust that drifted lazily away from the road toward the creek was the only reminder of his passage. Then, topping a ridge a mile north of town, Lance saw that Roby had turned westward and was angling across the sage flat.

Lance reined up, curious about it, for Roby's Big 9 lay to the east. He hipped around in his saddle, looking back past the town. From this elevation he could see the lakes, small spots of gray surrounded by the dark green of the tules. The sun was almost down, but the Star K buildings were visible in the thinning light, set high on a ridge south of the lakes.

He rode on, the land tilting toward the foothills of the Blue Mountains with here and there a single juniper tree making a black shape in the sagebrush. Poor graze compared to other ranges he had seen, and that, too, was a thought he would not have had before he'd left. Perhaps that was the reason his father and Dave and the others stayed, even George Brett. They didn't know what the rest of the country was like, or they had forgotten.

Roby's Big 9 lay to Lance's right. A twisting ribbon of willows marked the passage of the creek just east of the buildings. He remembered Mrs. Roby as a strong, healthy woman, and he wondered what was wrong with her. A sudden impulse made him turn his bay off the road to follow the wheel ruts that led to the Big 9 Ranch.

Lance had no real reason to think that Roby was lying. Still, a vague suspicion lingered in his mind. If Roby was stealing cattle as Brett claimed, he would want to appear poverty-stricken, and a sick wife might be an excuse. Now that Lance thought about it, Roby did not seem like a man who would beg under any circumstances.

The sun was a small red rim above the western horizon when Lance rode into the

Big 9 yard. The boy Rusty was coming from a corral with a foaming bucket of milk in his hand. He yelled, "Ma," and ran into the house, the milk spilling down his leg.

Lance reined up and waited. When he had left the valley, the Robys had never had any visitors, and he doubted that the situation had changed. Lamplight washed out through the open front door and windows, and Mrs. Roby appeared in the doorway, a strong, round shape against the light.

She said in a cool, distant voice, "Good evening."

Lance touched the brim of his hat. He asked, "Pete around?"

"No," she said, making no pretense of recognizing him.

Rusty crowded past her to stand on the porch. He said in an important voice, "I told Pa you was back. That there old teacher would have had me in the darned schoolhouse yet if you hadn't come along."

So Rusty had recognized him and Roby had known he was back. He said, "I reckon she'd have let you out by now."

"Naw, she wouldn't," the boy said angrily. "She allows I oughtta do better with my arithmetic, but I can add, and Pa says that's all he can do. I ain't gonna go to school no more this year."

"You shut your trap," Mrs. Roby said angrily. "You'll go if you're told and don't forget it."

But the boy wasn't paying any attention to his mother. He was watching Lance, his freckled face bright with anticipation. He said, "Oughtta be some fun around here now. Pa, he allowed you'd raise hell coming back when no one was looking for—"

Mrs. Roby cracked him across the back of his head with the open palm of her hand, silencing him. "You hush now, hear?" She peered at Lance. "You're young Markham, ain't you? Only saw you a time or two, you know. Why'd you want Pete?"

"I saw him in the store. He said you'd been ailing."

"Me? Why, I work like a horse. He's crazy as a—" She stopped, as if suddenly realizing she was making a liar out of her husband, and added hastily, "It's my heart, but I don't talk about it. Don't want no pity, we don't. Pete shouldn't have said nothing about it."

"I was just wondering if there was anything I could do," Lance said.

"We're making out," Mrs. Roby said, and then added bitterly, "Funny, you riding in here and asking that, being gone and all. We've lived on this place three years and no one ever asked before."

"I'll be sloping along then, ma'am," Lance said, and wheeling his bay, rode out of the yard.

HE ANGLED northwest, reached the road, and turned north on it, certain now that Pete Roby had lied about his wife. Too, the kid had let the cat out of the bag when he'd said Roby was worried about Lance raising hell. It added up to something, but Lance wasn't sure what.

He passed the Seeley place, wondering what old Bill would say if he showed up and asked to see Nora. George Brett was the right man for her, as far as Bill was concerned. Steady enough, well-fixed, and no hell-raiser. The funny part of it was Nora had said they needed a man who was crazy enough to fight. But Lance had come back a different man than he'd been when he'd left; the wildness had gone out of him. If he had a little money to jingle in his pockets, he might suit old Bill now, but he wouldn't suit Nora.

A hell of a bad deal, he thought sourly. Maybe the wildness wasn't gone. He had a lot of things to find out. When he did, they'd make a pattern, but right now he was sure of just one thing. He couldn't forget for a minute the way he felt about Nora, not for any job George Brett had to offer.

Night had moved in across the valley by the time Lance reached the Rafter M. He turned off the road that led straight north into the mountains. The lamplight in the ranch house windows made yellow eyes in the darkness. Now that he was here, he had to fight a sudden rush of weakness that gripped him. It might be better if he turned around and rode back to town. He could guess what Dave would say and it wouldn't be good to hear. He wouldn't like Dave's wife, either. Then he thought of his father and knew there would be no turning back.

He rode past the house, and dismounting at the horse trough, let his bay drink. He had not given much thought to Brett's suspicion of Dave. Knowing Dave, it was ridiculous. But there was his wife Kitsie. Well, it was still ridiculous—Dave who had always been smug and self-righteous and proud of his ability to do two men's work.

Lance found the lantern inside the barn where it had been kept as long as he could remember. He pulled gear off his horse, fed him, and blew out the lantern. For a time he stood by the barn door, not wanting to go in and wondering why no one had come out of the house to see who it was.

The first row of foothills lay just north of the buildings. He could smell the pines; he could hear the chatter of the creek as it rushed down the slope. He was remembering things he had forgotten, little things that hadn't seemed important two years ago.

He'd shot his first deer in the fringe of timber above the house, a spike buck that Dave had laughed at, saying it was the worst runt he'd ever seen. Upstream about a quarter of a mile there was a hole that had always been good for a few trout. Dave had laughed, too, at the fish Lance had caught.

"A fisherman, are you?" Dave would sneer. "Why, hell, I'm surprised they could

get their mouths open wide enough to get hooked. You oughtta be ashamed, taking little ones like that away from their mammas."

The old bitterness crowded into Lance again. Child stuff, George Brett would say. Maybe it was, but things like that had been important to Lance and they seemed important now. Whatever he had done had been wrong, or not worth Dave's attention. If he broke a horse, Dave claimed he made an outlaw out of him. At roundup Dave would cuss him out because he'd missed a critter somewhere in the pines. They'd had their fights, and he'd always licked Dave, and then he'd get a licking from his father, so in time he'd learned to take Dave's cussedness.

He walked toward the house, knowing he had to get it over with sooner or later. He'd been wrong taking the job Brett had offered him. He couldn't stay. It had been intolerable before, and now after two years of being on his own it would be worse. Then it occurred to him that perhaps his father had been glad to see him go, that it had been the easiest way to solve a problem which had no solution as long as he was here.

He stepped up on the porch, wondering briefly if he should knock. To hell with it, he thought savagely, and opening the front door, went in. The house was saturated with the smell of frying salt side; he heard a woman call in an irritated voice, "About time you're getting in."

HE HESITATED, looking around the room that should have been familiar and wasn't. The old, homemade furniture was gone. A new oak table stood in the middle of the room, a lighted lamp on it. There was a glass vase with a red hollyhock beside the lamp.

All the furniture was new. The black leather couch looked as if it had never been used. Two rocking chairs. A picture on the wall of a woman he had never seen.

Dave's wife, he thought, studying it. She was pretty enough, with a round, bold face and a high pile of hair and eyes that seemed alive.

"Who are you?"

She stood in the kitchen doorway, wary and frightened. Lance jerked off his hat, embarrassed. "I'm Dave's brother Lance."

She took a deep breath; the fear flowing out of her. "Well, you gave me a turn, walking in this way like you owned the place." She managed a smile. "We didn't expect you, you know."

"Where's Dad?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. Neither one of them is back yet. I never know when they'll be in, but they're always hungry."

She leaned against the door jamb, frankly curious. She was a tall, leggy woman with a ripe figure and glossy black hair. The picture on the wall didn't do her justice, Lance thought, for there was something about her that a picture could not capture. Her skin was an ivory shade, and her lips were full and red, parted now from the whitest teeth Lance had ever seen.

"I guess you're Dave's wife Kitsie," Lance said.

"That's right." She laughed softly. "Welcome home, Lance. I should have said it sooner, but you caught me unprepared." She walked toward him, hips swaying under her clinging black dress. "Looks like it's up to me to do the welcoming."

He stood there, rooted, not knowing what she was going to do until she kissed him on the lips. She tucked his right arm through hers and propelled him toward the kitchen. "I expect you're hungry, so we'll go ahead and eat."

"No hurry," he said.

"Serves them right." She pulled a chair back from the table. "Sit down. I'll dish it up. You'll have to take what Dave and Dad eat since I didn't know you were coming. Why didn't you let us know?"

He sat down as she walked on past the

table toward the range. It was new, too, he saw, shiny and clean, and he thought that whatever faults she might have, at least shoddy housekeeping was not one of them.

"I thought it was better this way," he said.

She glanced over her shoulder at him, laughing in her soft way. "You're right. I want to see Dave's face when he comes in. I've changed him, Lance, changed him so much you won't know him, but there was one thing I couldn't change." She forked salt side into a platter and brought it to the table. "That's the way he feels about you. You might as well know that he considers the money you got when you left your part of the inheritance. If you figure on settling down here, he'll raise hell."

"I expected that," Lance said.

SHE finished bringing food from the stove and poured out coffee. She sat down beside him, reaching out to lay a hand on his arm. "Lance, I've heard a lot about you, but you don't look like I thought you would." She drew her hand back. "The way Dave told it, I supposed you were a ring-tailed wowser."

"I was," he said, and began to eat.

She was a good cook, Lance discovered, and he was not surprised, judging from the way she kept the house. Later she brought a chocolate cake from the pantry, cut it, and set a liberal piece in front of him, bending so that she touched him. He remembered what Brett had said about her.

"As far as I'm concerned, I'd like for you to stay." Kitsie brought the coffee pot from the stove and filled his cup. "I think you'd be good company." She took the coffee pot back to the stove. "You would, wouldn't you?"

"A ring-tailed wowser wouldn't be good company," he said. "I eat women."

"I'm the kind of woman who likes to be eaten." She came back and sat down.

"Where have you been, Lance? Tell me about it. I've lived in this dumpy place for almost two years and I'm getting an itch in my feet."

"Around," he said. "I got as far south as Arizona. Came back up the coast."

She leaned forward, her dark eyes bright. "Were you in San Francisco?"

He nodded. "For a couple of days."

"I was in a show there once. I liked it better than any other city I ever saw. You get so tired of mining camps and cowtowns."

"Where did Dave meet you?"

"Here. In Agate City." She curled her nose. "City! Isn't that a hell of a joke, calling that miserable collection of shacks a city!"

"Why did you stay here?"

"The show went broke on account of the coyote who ran it got away with all the money. I damned near starved before I got Dave in front of a preacher. That little Seeley woman gave me some trouble." She gave Lance a straight look. "You were pretty crazy about her, weren't you?"

"Still am."

Kitsie shrugged. "I don't see what a man would see in her, but then I often wonder why women like her ever get a man."

"You wouldn't know." He glanced around the room. "You've changed things," he said. "I had the notion Dave wasn't doing very well, with the hard times and all."

"Dave's doing real well," she said proudly. "All he needed was a woman to put a bee under his tail. That's just what I did."

Lance started to roll a smoke. He stopped, the brown paper curling between his fingers, eyes on her.

"What's wrong?"

She didn't answer. There was no need to. Dave, standing in the front door, said in a dry, brittle voice, "You two look pretty cozy. Too damned cozy to suit me!"

CHAPTER 4

Traitor to the Clan

SLOWLY Lance rose and turned and watched his brother cross the living room to the kitchen door. Dave's face was sullen and bitter. Lance said, "Hello, Dave."

"Behave, Dave," Kitsie said sharply. "Sit down. Supper's been ready for an hour."

Dave stopped ten feet from Lance, big-knuckled hands clenched at his sides. He had changed, changed so much that he seemed like a stranger. He had been a large man, heavier and taller than Lance, and he had always possessed a sort of straight-backed dignity that gave the impression he was certain in his own mind that he was a better man than anyone else in the valley.

Now there was a beaten-down slackness in his shoulders; he was unbelievably thin; the bronze skin of his face was pulled tightly over the cheekbones. Only his black eyes, biting and contemptuous and utterly hostile, assured Lance that this was the brother he had grown up with.

"I didn't think you had the guts to show your face around here again," Dave said, "but the prodigal did come back, didn't he? Wasted his substance on riotous living and came crawling home. That's where this story's different. There won't be no fatted calves butchered for you."

"Dave, you fool!" Kitsie cried. "Shut up and sit down."

But there was no shutting him up. "Heard in town I was married, didn't you, so you sneaked out here when I was gone. Won't do you no good. I won't let you near her, no more than I'll let you stay on the ranch. That's what you figured on, wasn't it, sitting around the house while I was working?"

Kitsie ran to him and gripped his shoulders. "Dave, you chowder-headed idiot!

He's your brother, and just got here!"

Dave struck her across the cheek, a vicious blow that sent her staggering toward the table. Dave said, "I've had enough trouble keeping men away from you without having Lance hanging around."

Lance took a step toward Dave, his fists clenched; then he stopped. He had not returned to fight with Dave; he had no way of knowing what had gone between them or how much provocation Dave had for striking her. He said, "I came back to see Dad. Where is he?"

"I don't know." Dave put a hand to his forehead as if finding it difficult to think. "Ain't seen him since morning."

"Dave," Kitsie said in a low tone, "I told you the last time you hit me you'd never do it again. I'm getting out."

"Get out and be damned!" Dave shouted. "But if you start going with Brett, I'll shoot his guts full of holes. You tell him that."

Kitsie ran past him into the living room, picked up the lamp from the table and disappeared into a bedroom. Dave's eyes were fixed on Lance, bright and hot with the insane fury that gripped him. He lunged at Lance, a fist swinging up in a long uppercut. Lance ducked and chopped Dave down with a single, hard blow to his chin.

"You haven't been able to lick me since I was five years old," Lance said. "I don't know why you think you can do it now."

Dave lay on the floor, half-stunned. He brought himself up on his left elbow and shook his head, then he grabbed for his gun. Lance jumped at him and kicked the gun out of his hand, sending it clattering across the floor. He reached down and grabbed Dave by the front of his shirt. As he hauled him upright, he heard Kitsie's heels cracking on the front room floor as she ran out of the house.

Lance had known it would be bad, but he had never dreamed it would be like

this. He swung Dave toward the table and slammed him down onto a chair. Dave slumped there, his chin dropping forward on his chest. Lance stood over him, not knowing what to do or say. Dave was out of his head, but Lance could not tell whether it was the result of finding him here or not.

Lance sat down across the table from Dave and waited. Presently the sound of hoofs hammering on the hard ground came to them. Dave straightened up, his head cocked until the drum of hoofs died; then he slumped back. He said, "She's gone. She should have gone a long time ago."

"Tell me about it," Lance said. "You'll feel better if you talk."

"I'll never feel better," Dave said. "I've gone to hell. That's all. Sold Dad out. Lost Nora. Brought that damned black-haired floozy here and let her turn everything upside down." He stared at Lance, all dignity gone from him. "Well, you're square with me and you never had to lift a finger. Feels good, don't it?"

"No," Lance said. "It don't feel good at all."

DAVE got up, gripping the table and swaying there for a moment; then he went into the pantry.

Lance said, "If you come out of there with a gun, I'll kill you. I didn't come back here just to let you plug me."

"What did you come back for?"

"Nora sent for me."

Dave came out of the pantry, a bottle of whiskey in his hand. As long as Lance could remember, there had never been any whiskey in the house and Dave had never been a drinker. John Markham, severe in his judgments, had not permitted it.

Dave tilted the bottle, took a long drink, and wiped a hand across his mouth. He came back to the table and sat down, placing the bottle in front of him. "Two years," he muttered. "Two years since you left. I figured I was pretty good, taking Nora

away from you. Then Kitsie showed up, and I thought I had some heaven, but all I got was a chunk of hell."

"What's wrong with this range?" Lance asked.

"Everything." Dave took another drink. "More'n you could ever fix even if you wanted to. Go ahead. Tell me I'm no damned good. I knew it all the time, but I never figured anyone else would find it out. Now they know, Dad and Nora and all of 'em. If they don't, they'll find out when Kitsie gets done talking."

So George Brett was right. Lance rolled and sealed a smoke, his eyes on the brown paper. He said, "Brett hired me to find out what was happening to the valley beef. Want to tell me?"

"Why not?" Dave looked at Lance and laughed, a wild sound that held no humor. "I'm finished. Kitsie finished me when she walked out. I never was man enough for her. I never was man enough for any-

thing that counted. I talked big, but that was all."

This was a new Dave, with all the smugness gone from him, partly drunk and a little crazy. Lance fired his smoke and blew out the match. "About the cattle..."

"I helped steal 'em," Dave said. "Me'n Curly Wilkes and Pete Roby. We'd take a few here and a few there so nobody would miss 'em, and we drove 'em across the summit. They needed me 'cause nobody thought I'd get into a deal like that. A fellow from Canyon City bought 'em and butchered 'em for the mining camps."

"How'd you get into it?"

Dave threw out a hand. "Hell, you can see. A new stove. New furniture for the front room. Perfume and silk dresses and bustles and every damned geegaw she could think of. She made me crazy trying to satisfy her." He rubbed his face, his hands trembling. "And all the time she was seeing George Brett on the side. I



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had to kill him to stop it and I wasn't man enough to do that."

The cigarette had gone out in Lance's mouth. He said, "We'll see the sheriff. Maybe we can make a deal if you'll talk."

Dave grabbed the bottle and took another drink. "To hell with it! I'm riding out in the morning." He stared at Lance, with the old resentment and bitterness. "Damn it, you oughta feel good. You saw Kitsie walk out on me and you'll get the ranch."

Lance rose. "You figure Dad'll be in after while?"

"Sure." Dave got up. "I'm going to bed. I'm getting out afore sun-up. You ain't stopping me, you or Dad or nobody. Savvy?"

"And you'll be running the rest of your life. Help me bust this up and you'll get an easy sentence. You can come back and start over."

"Yeah, and let you lord it over me!" Dave shouted. "Every day you'd rub it in. To hell with you!"

Dave picked up the whiskey bottle and lurched out of the kitchen. Lance heard the bedroom door slam. He hesitated, the desire to see Nora becoming a frantic urge in him. He went outside and stopped to listen, hoping he would hear his father riding in, but there was no sound except the clatter of the creek and the hooting of an owl from somewhere on the ridge.

Lance crossed the yard to the barn; he lighted the lantern and saddled his bay, and all the time his talk with Dave seemed more like a hideous nightmare than reality. He blew the lantern out and led the horse outside, stopping again to listen for an incoming rider. He wondered how much his father knew. Probably nothing, for John Markham would be blind to any flaw in Dave.

MOUNTING, he rode downstream, not taking time to go by the road. Odd, he thought, how little he cared what hap-

pened to Dave. He'd be gone in the morning. Lance had lost track of time, but now he saw a light in the Seeley ranch house. Nora or her father was still up, and he was relieved.

Circling the barn and sheds, he pulled up in front of the house and tied his bay. They had heard him ride in. The front door was flung open and old Bill Seeley came out on the porch, a Winchester held on the ready.

"Sing out," Seeley called. "Who the hell is it?"

"Lance Markham. I want to see Nora."

The old man shouted a curse at him. "The devil's got a way of bobbing up when you don't expect him. I thought I made it clear how you stood around here."

But Nora had heard him, and she came out of the house, calling, "Come in, Lance."

"Not by a jugful he don't," Bill raged. "If he does, I'll blow a hole in his brisket that'll be big enough for a wagon to go through."

Lance had started toward the house. He saw Nora grapple with her father and he began to run. He reached them just as Seeley got clear of Nora's grip and swung his rifle barrel up. Lance batted it to one side.

"Still full of vinegar, ain't you, Bill?" Lance twisted the Winchester out of the old man's hands. "Chuck full like you always was."

Seeley jumped back toward the door, yelling, "I suppose you'll shoot me now. That'd be about your size."

"It's what you deserve," Nora said hotly. "You've been making a fool out of yourself for years, but this is the best job you ever did. Come in, Lance."

Whirling, she went inside. Seeley stood beside the door, baleful eyes fixed on Lance. He muttered, "A fool, am I? A fool because I want to see her married well. What'n tunket did you have to come back for?"

"She sent for me," Lance answered. "That's the only thing that would ever have brought me back."

"You're lying," Seeley spluttered. "Come Christmas she's marrying George Brett. She wouldn't send for you."

"Ask her," Lance said.

Seeley stomped into the house, shaking a gnarled finger at Nora. "You heard what he said. Tell him he's a liar so he'll get out of here."

Nora stood in the middle of the room, her head high, her chin thrust defiantly at her father. "I did send for him. You want to know why?"

Seeley swallowed, his mouth sagging open. "Yeah, I'd like to know."

"Because I'm tired of being told what I have to do," she flared. "When I was a girl I had my own way, but the older I got, the more you thought you had to boss me around."

"All right," Seeley shouted. "I spoiled you when you were a kid, letting you sashay around . . ."

"And another thing," Nora cut in. "You haven't done anything to straighten out our troubles. You just sit around the house talking about your rheumatism. I thought Lance could do something."

"Tell him the real reason," Lance said.

Seeley spun toward him, his craggy face hot with his temper. "What would you know about the real reason? Maybe I ain't so much no more, stove-up so I can't sit a saddle for more'n half a mile, but that ain't no business of your'n."

"The only reason she's promised to marry Brett is to see you get taken care of," Lance said.

In the sudden silence, Seeley wheeled to gape at Nora. She stood with her head high, her eyes steady on Lance.

"That's right," she said softly. "But I found out today I couldn't marry him even for that. He's bullied me the last time. The only thing I'm sorry about is that when I had a chance, I didn't have the

courage to do what I'd told myself I would if I ever saw you again."

"What was that?" Lance asked.

She bit her lip, glancing at her father and then bringing her eyes back to Lance. "Tell you I loved you," she said in a low tone, "and that I'd marry you if you asked me."

Lance turned to Seeley with a joyful grin. "Watch this, Bill," he said. "If your rheumatism ain't too bad, give yourself a kick in the pants."

He walked to Nora and took her into his arms. She lifted her lips for his kiss, her hands coming up to circle his neck. Then she drew her head back, smiling.

"Was that worth coming back for, Lance?"

"Worth riding a million miles for." He swung to face Seeley. "You're sitting between a rock and the hard place, Bill. You'll give us your blessing, or we'll ride out and you'll be eating your own cooking the rest of your life."

"And he'd have a stomach ache the first time he fried an egg," she said scornfully.

"I thought I was doing what was best for you," Seeley muttered. "Take Dave, now. He always worked circles around Lance. You had a chance to marry him, but no, you had to start shying off."

"Sit down, Bill," Lance said. "Or you'll fall down when you hear what I've got to say."

"Sit down yourself, Lance," Nora said. "I knew something had happened or you wouldn't have come over."

SHE led him to the worn couch where he had sat so many times and held her in his arms while Seeley had slammed around in his room just to show he didn't like it. But now the old man had nothing to say. He yanked a chair away from the wall and sat down, glaring at Lance.

"Say your spiel," Seeley muttered, "but don't get the notion I want you for a son-in-law."

Nora dropped down on the couch beside Lance, holding his hand. "I suppose you had trouble with Kitsie, although I thought she'd like having another man around."

"She liked that well enough," Lance said, and told them what had happened.

Nora stiffened as he talked, her face pale. Seeley shook his head, believing Lance against his will. When Lance was done, Seeley muttered, "That lying son! All this time pretending he was so high and mighty when he wasn't nothing but a two-bit rustler."

"You can't let him ride off, Lance," Nora said. "You've got to do something." "Why?"

"He's your brother. You love him, Lance, a little."

"What's he ever done to make me love him?"

"Nothing, I guess," she said, "but he's still your brother. It was always his pride, Lance, his crazy pride that made him treat you the way he did."

He looked at her, not understanding. Then he thought how much he had changed, how much he wanted Nora, and it was the wanting which had changed him. He said, "I'll do what I can, but it'll be for you and Dad, not Dave."

"I was engaged to him for a little more than a month," she said. "I could have married him like Dad said, but I couldn't make myself. It was the same with George. I'd have found some way out of it."

Seeley rose. Picking up his pipe from the table, he stuffed the bowl with tobacco. "I can't get over it," he muttered. "Roby, sure, and I ain't surprised about Wilkes. But Dave!"

"I broke up with him over Kitsie," Nora said. "Several men were chasing her, but she picked Dave. I don't know why unless it was because he made so much of his respectability. Then she kept prodding him into buying things for her. I suppose stealing cattle was the only way he could get

her all the expensive things she wanted."

Seeley snorted. "Women, hell. I'd have put her across my knee and whopped her good."

"Dave said she's been seeing Brett," Lance said.

"He's crazy," Seeley snorted. "George wouldn't have truck with her, engaged to Nora like he is."

"I'm not sure," Nora said wearily. "I know what she did to Dave. It might be the same with George."

"I'd better get back," Lance said. "Dad might be home. I'll tell Brett first thing in the morning about us. If he tries taking your job . . ."

"I'll tell him," Nora said.

"I don't have any money," Lance said. "Maybe we'd better wait . . ."

"No. Waiting is one thing I can't do. I've waited too long already." She looked at her father. "It's past your bedtime."

"I ain't sleepy," he said truculently.

"Let's go outside, Lance," Nora said, and walked past her father, ignoring him.

"I ain't sure you've got enough sense to know when you're wrong, Bill," Lance said, "but I have. I've done a lot of thinking in the two years I've been gone."

"What with?" Seeley asked derisively.

"Nothing, maybe. You'll make a hell of a father-in-law, but I'll put up with you. That oughtta prove I'm different than when I left."

A grin broke across Seeley's wrinkled face. "I reckon it does at that."

HE LEFT the room and found Nora waiting on the porch. She tucked a hand through his arm and they walked across the yard to the hitch pole. Lance said, "About that money I had when I left. I figured I was pretty smart. Thought I could lick anything, so I bought a ranch in Arizona on a shoestring. Well, the shoestring busted."

"It's all right," Nora said as if she only half heard. "I wanted to tell you about

Dave. It's not easy because I've got to admit I was childish and wrong. I'm enough like Dad that I hate to admit I'm wrong."

"Forget it."

"No, I've got to tell you about Dave. You never understood him, but I do, because I was with him a lot after you left. I mean the month we were engaged. I didn't really aim to break up with you. It was just that Dad kept rawhiding me, saying you weren't good for anything but getting into trouble, so I wanted you to change but you wouldn't. I guess that was why I worked Dave into taking me home that night. It wasn't hard to get him to propose. He wanted me because he thought he was getting something you wanted."

"He was," Lance said.

She was leaning against the hitchrack, her hands gripping the pole behind her. The moon was a full, yellow circle above the eastern rim of the valley, and Lance, looking down at her troubled face, knew that she needed to talk.

"I thought you'd take me away from Dave," she went on, "but I just had to make it hard, so when you came over the next morning, I said sure, I was going to marry Dave. Then when I heard you'd left, I felt like the sky had dropped on top of me. I got those few letters telling me where you were but not giving me any idea how you felt and I couldn't bring myself to ask you to come home. I fought my pride for two years, and it wasn't until you wrote that you were back in Oregon working in the Wallowa county that I finally got enough nerve to write."

She stopped again, lowering her head so that her face was shadowed. She said, "It was partly on account of Dad that I wrote. I wanted you to show him you could do something besides just fight. I guess I thought you could come up with a miracle. I didn't know about Dave being in this trouble. I asked George to hire you and I thought being out here, you could kind of nose around. But you can't do anything

about a drouth and hard times and that's how George got a mortgage on every spread north of the fence."

"I can beat his head down between his ears!"

"Stop it, Lance. That's the way you used to talk."

"Yeah," he said somberly. "Sometimes I think I'm different and then I find out I'm not."

"I don't care, Lance. That's the funny part of it. Not even on account of Dad. I'll take you just the way you are." She laughed wryly. "I got off the subject, didn't I? Well, I said I saw a lot of Dave and he talked more than he realized, about you and your dad and himself. He never said it in so many words, but I put it together. You see, he was jealous of you because he couldn't do things like you did."

"That don't make sense," Lance said bitterly. "He was always rawhiding me about not doing things right."

"Can't you see, Lance? He had to be little you to defend his own pride. You went fishing and caught trout but he never did. You didn't know it, but he tried. If you went hunting, you brought in a deer. He didn't. You rode horses he couldn't. All he could do was to work hard and make a lot out of being steady and dependable. He about went crazy when your dad borrowed that money and gave it to you. He said your dad wouldn't do that for him."

Lance rolled a smoke, thinking about this—a new thought because he had never been able to see behind the mask of smugness that Dave had habitually worn. He asked, "Why did you break up with him?"

"I was looking for an excuse. There never was anything definite, just a feeling I had every time he kissed me or had his hands on me. Or maybe it was because I couldn't get you out of my mind. Anyhow, Kitsie got stranded in town and when I found out Dave was seeing her, I broke it off. He wanted me because you did, then it seemed to him she was better because

several men wanted her. It was always his pride, Lance. I saw it in everything he said and did."

"Then he's mighty damned small. There's nothing I can do for him."

"But you've got to try, Lance. You've got to respect yourself. And your dad . . ."

A gunshot sounded from the north, another, and then several, rolling out together. Nora gripped Lance's arms. "Where is it?"

"Sounds like it's home," he said, and jerking away from her grasp, he ran to his horse.

"Wait," Nora cried. "We'll go with you."

But he didn't wait. He yanked the lines free and swung into the saddle, hearing the pound of hoofs on the road. He wheeled his bay and went down the lane in a hard run, cracking steel to the horse at every jump.

CHAPTER 5

Nightmare Range

LANCE could not guess what had happened, but he was afraid. Not for Dave, because Nora had said nothing that had changed his feelings about his brother. He had more respect for an outlaw who made no pretense about what he was, than he had for a man who appeared to be something he wasn't. The fear was for his father, who might have come home to find Pete Roby or Curly Wilkes there with Dave. Anything could have happened if it had been that way.

The rider was coming south hell-for-leather. Lance reached the road and swung north, pulling his gun as he made the turn. He saw the horse and rider then, still some distance away, a swiftly moving shape in the moonlight. The man must have seen him in that same moment, for he fired, and powderflame made its brief, darting finger.

Lance rode low, holding his fire as the distance between them was cut down. The other threw a second shot, the bullet com-

ing close this time, and Lance answered, firing three times. He could not wait any longer. There was too much danger of having his horse hit. He had raised the bay from a colt, and the animal had been Lance's one, dependable friend during the past two years.

A third shot tugged at the crown of Lance's hat. They were close now, and Lance used his last two bullets. The first one missed, but the second must have tagged the other's horse, for he reared and plunged, throwing his rider into the sagebrush beside the road.

Lance went on for another fifty feet before he reined up, having no idea whether he had hit the man or how badly he had been hurt by his fall. Lance dismounted, stood beside his heaving gelding until he had reloaded, and then leaving the horse ground-hitched, dropped belly-flat and crawled along the road toward the fallen man.

"Don't waste your lead on me!"

Pete Roby's voice, not far ahead. Lance could not see him, but he didn't trust the man, so he stayed down, moving slowly, his gun cocked. Roby's horse had disappeared down the road. Lance stopped, judging that Roby was not more than ten feet ahead.

A gun thudded into the dust of the road. Roby said, "Come on in, whoever you are. I'm finished."

Lance edged forward another three feet, still taking his time and moving without sound. Then he saw Roby, lying on his back, a high clump of sagebrush between him and the road. Lance said nothing until he had maneuvered around the sagebrush and was sure he would catch Roby's movement in the moonlight if this were a trap.

"You wiggle the wrong way, Pete," Lance said, "and I'll plug you."

"I figured it was you. You're either lucky or you're as tough as Brett thinks you are."

"What's Brett got to do with this?"

"Everything. Didn't Dave tell you?"

"He just mentioned you and Curly."

"I reckon he didn't know. Curly and me never told him, but I thought he'd guessed, knowing about Kitsie and Brett. Come on up where I can see you. I'm leaving a wife and kid, Lance. I want you to help 'em."

Lance inched forward until he was beside Roby, his gun still on him. He said, "I can't do anything for your wife and kid."

"You've got to, Lance! And I know you will. A man who'd dig up ten dollars after hearing that song and dance I gave Brett in the store must be on the level." Roby struggled with his breathing, then went on, "I ran into your dad. I got him, but he drilled me. Maybe I've got a minute. Maybe ten. All I know I'm bleeding like a stuck hog."

Lance's jaw tightened. "Say your piece."

ROBY said, "Ma will move out of the valley soon as she buries me. She's got a little money hid in the house, but it ain't enough. I want you to buy the place from her."

"I'm broke."

"Make a deal of some kind. Pay her on time. And whatever you do, get Brett. He's been playing innocent while the rest of us took the risks, damn his soul!"

"I'll do what I can," Lance said.

"That's all I'm asking. That was a fake play about credit. We'd done it before so folks wouldn't guess we was hooked up in this deal. . . . It was Brett's scheme from the first. Used to see me when he brought the Star K mail. I wasn't getting no big wages from Kirk, and Brett talked me into moving across the fence. Fixed up a deal with a Canyon City butcher he knew. Half the money went to him for fixing the deal. He's got it in the safe. Dig it out of him."

"I'll get it."

"I shot Dave tonight. Met Kitsie on the road. Said she'd walked out. I figured Dave would talk if I didn't get him, so I shot him. Then your dad showed up."

Roby's voice was very low now. One hand gripped his stomach in a futile effort to hold back the blood that was pumping out of him. Lance, leaning over him, thought of his father. Afraid to hear the answer, he asked, "How bad was Dad hit?"

"Dunno," Roby whispered. "I lit a shuck as soon as I could. It's Brett you've got to get. He sweet-talked me into this. Strip the little fellows he said, so they couldn't pay him back. He's talking about damming Mustang Creek and irrigating the valley. He'll be bigger'n Kirk, he says."

"Kitsie have a hand in it?"

"Sure. Got Dave into it. Now she'll go to Brett." He was silent a long moment, and Lance thought he was done. Then he heard Roby breathe, in a last burst of virulent hatred, "Get Brett, damn his sneaking, lily-white soul!"

That was all. Lance rose, slipping his gun into holster. So it was Brett, running a store and pretending to be a friend of the north valley ranchers while he worked out this scheme to rob them. . . .

Lance ran back to his horse and mounted. He rode slowly because he did not want to hurry his tired bay. Ahead of him lamp-light showed in the Rafter M ranch house. Even before he saw the horses in the yard, he was sure Nora and Bill Seeley would be here. He stepped down and went in, afraid of what he would find.

John Markham was lying on the couch, with Nora sitting near him. When she heard Lance come in, she said, "He's going to be all right, Lance," and a rush of relief swept through Lance.

Markham tried to raise himself on an elbow, but Nora pushed him back. "Don't move. You'll start bleeding again if you don't lie still."

Lance strode to the couch. He said, "Hello, Dad," and saw the smile light his father's pale face.

"Lance," Markham held out a hand and Lance took it. "I knew you'd come back, but I didn't think it would be to this."

"It's all right, Dad."

"No, nothing's right. Look in Dave's room."

Lance hesitated and glanced at Nora, who nodded. He took one of the lamps from the table and walked across the room to the door of Dave's bedroom. Holding the lamp high, he saw Dave's twisted body on the floor, a gun lying inches from an out-flung hand. The empty whiskey bottle was on the bureau. Even if he had been sober, he would have been too slow to have downed Roby.

Lance took the lamp back to the table and put it down. He had no strong emotion either way about Dave's death. This was better than being strung up by a band of outraged ranchers; perhaps it was even better than going to prison.

"Roby did it," Lance said. "I ran into him on the road. He got boogery and started throwing lead at me. He's dead."

JOHN MARKHAM didn't say anything for a moment. He lay very still, his dark eyes on Lance. Dave had had those same dark eyes, Lance thought. They had looked alike, but they had been entirely different, for there was no falseness about John Markham.

"The Lord has a way of providing justice," Markham said finally.

Lance glanced at Nora. She was thinking the same thing he was, he thought, that John Markham had stated a greater truth than he realized. He turned his gaze back to his father, noticing for the first time how much he had aged during the last two years.

"We've had hard times and drouth since you left," Markham said. "Just about finished us. Lost most of our cattle, too. Couldn't seem to stop the rustling."

"We'll stop it," Lance said.

"We can't go on living off Brett," Markham said. "He's pulled us through this far, but now we've got to get a herd together if we can." He closed his eyes, and asked,

in a lifeless voice, "Where's Kitsie?"

"Gone," Lance answered. "She won't come back. I was here when she left."

"She wasn't any good for Dave. Kept wanting things. He got to gambling on account of her. Gone almost every night."

So that was the way they had fooled him, Lance thought. A stranger would have said John Markham was stupid, but that would have been wrong. Dave was an older son he wanted to believe in, wanted to believe in so much that he'd been blind.

"He shouldn't talk so much," Nora said. "Dad's heating some water in the kitchen. I'll get a bandage on his wound soon as I can. It's too high in his shoulder to be dangerous if we don't let it get infected."

Lance nodded and went into the kitchen. Seeley was standing by the range, his hands in his pockets, shoulders slack. He gave Lance a sober look, the animosity gone from his eyes.

"I've got a chore to do before sun-up," Lance said. "I'd like to borrow your horse."

"Sure, take him. Want some help?"

That surprised Lance. He said, "No, it's a personal chore." He scratched his cheek, grinning a little. "Maybe you won't turn out to be such a bad father-in-law after all."

"Figured I'd give you a trial," Seeley said. "It's like Nora said. I can't cook worth a damn."

"Better sit down while I tell you something else. You'll fall down sure this time if you don't."

"Nothing can surprise me no more. Go ahead."

"Brett's behind all your trouble."

Seeley spread his hands as if this was the last thing he could stand. "I should have sat down. How'd you hear?"

"Roby told me. Put my horse up, will you?"

"I'll take care of him."

"Don't tell Dad about what Dave was doing."

"He's bound to find out."

"He won't need to know now."

"I'll keep mum," Seeley said, "and I'll tell Nora."

Lance returned to the front room. He said, "I've been thinking, Dad. I'd best do some riding and get things lined out. We'll get a herd together."

"Ain't much left to make a herd out of," Markham said. "I'm glad you're home, Lance, awfully glad."

"I'm glad to be home," Lance said. "Should have come sooner, but it's no good to look back. It's what's ahead that counts."

He swung away from the couch and left the house. He untied Seeley's horse and mounted, and then saw that Nora had followed him. She asked in a low, tense voice, "What are you up to, Lance?"

"The roundup . . ."

"Don't lie to me, Lance. What are you up to?"

"Got a ride to make."

"It's Curly Wilkes, isn't it? He was the

third one and you think you've got to clean house. That it?"

"Yeah, I'm cleaning house."

"Lance, you'll never change," she cried. "It's just because you've always fought with Curly."

She stared at him accusingly, her face bitter and angry in the moonlight. He said, "I guess a man is what he is. Maybe I can't change." He paused, wondering if he should tell her about Brett, and decided not to. He added, "You said you wanted someone who was wild and crazy enough to fight. That's what I'm doing."

He wheeled his horse and rode away, leaving her standing there by the hitch pole. Tomorrow she might tell him she hadn't meant what she'd promised, tell him she wouldn't marry a man who was still so wild and crazy he might leave her a widow the day after she married him. Well, that was the risk he had to take. He was doing what he had to do.

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CHAPTER 6

Two to Go

SEELEY'S horse was slow, and it was late when Lance reached Agate City.

He was surprised to see that the only light on Main Street was in Brett's store. He wasn't sure what it meant, not even sure that it meant anything, but there was no time to figure it out. A horse was behind him on the road, coming fast. Probably Curly Wilkes, he thought, who had been out to see Roby. If Wilkes got behind him, he was finished.

He reined up at the end of Main Street and dismounted. He checked his gun and slipped it back into holster. He moved silently along the street at the edge of the walk, caution restraining him, but when he reached the front of Brett's store, he crossed the walk swiftly, opened the door, and went in. Wilkes was sweeping around the pot bellied stove in the back of the store.

For a moment Lance stood motionless, shocked by surprise. He asked, "Working late, ain't you, Curly?"

Wilkes threw the broom down with a loud clatter on the floor, and stepped into the aisle. He was not wearing his apron now, and he had a gun belted around his middle. The door into Brett's office was open. Glancing past Wilkes, Lance saw that the storekeeper was sitting at his desk, his head bent over some papers as if he were completely unconcerned about Lance's arrival.

"Yeah," Wilkes said, "real late. I've been waiting for you."

"How did you know I'd come?"

"Kitsie told us she'd busted it off with Dave, so we knew he'd blab. He did, didn't he?"

"He said he'd helped you and Roby steal the valley cattle. George hired me to find out about it. I'm reporting back."

"Save your wind," Wilkes said. "He don't want no report from you."

"He'll get one," Lance said. "There's one thing Kitsie didn't know. Roby killed Dave and now Roby's dead."

"I ain't crying over neither one of 'em. The only thing that counts with me is burying the hatchet in your noggin like I said this afternoon, but it won't be no hatchet. It'll be a hunk of lead."

"You ain't fast enough to outdraw me, Curly," Lance said. "Don't try."

For a moment neither spoke, a long moment that seemed to ribbon out into eternity. Lance was thinking of the fights they'd had, fights that had never settled anything. Actually there had never been anything to settle, just a kid grudge that had carried down through the years, and neither had guessed it would come to this. But there was something to settle now. Brett was the one, and Lance had to get Wilkes before he had a chance at Brett.

Then the moment was gone. Wilkes' grin broke across his face, flat and wicked. He said, "I'm sure glad you came back, bucko. Start drawing!"

Wilkes went for his gun and Lance drew, and the big room echoed with the rolling thunder of their shots. The first thing Lance had learned on the Arizona border was how to use his gun, a matter of necessity if he had wanted to survive. It was a trial by fire that Curly Wilkes had never undergone, so he was slow and his shot was wild.

Lance stood motionless, holding his smoking gun. He watched Wilkes go down in a slow curling fall, watched him make a last, frantic grab for the gun that had dribbled out of his fingers. Then Curly was dead, his hand inches from the butt of his Colt.

Smoke rose and drifted across the room; the last echo of gunfire faded into nothingness. Brett, standing in his office door, said, "A fast draw, Lance, a real fast draw."

"If you've got a gun, George, you'd better use it," Lance said. "You're the one I came for, not Curly."

"Not me," Brett said. "I told you this afternoon I was always interested in what makes men do what they do. With Curly it was pride and it killed him. He's worked for me more than a year, and there never was a day he didn't hope you'd ride into town so he could kill you. That's why he was waiting for you. He couldn't put it off."

"You figured he'd get me," Lance said. "You're just like a coyote, George, living off chickens and lambs while men with guts take the risks."

"It's a simple matter of intelligence," Brett said. "I have a talent for waiting, too. They go together, you know."

"You waited too long. Roby told me how it was."

Brett's brows lifted in surprise. "Well, come on back and tell me about it. Should make a good yarn."

"It does," Lance said, holstering his gun as he walked past Wilkes' body into Brett's office.

BRETT had sat down behind his desk. He lighted a cigar, amused eyes on Lance. Nothing on his broad face showed that he was either worried or frightened. It bothered Lance, for he had never given the man credit for any real depth of courage. Then the thought occurred to him, as it had in the afternoon, that courage ran in strange channels and perhaps Brett's had never been tested.

"Open the safe," Lance said. "Roby told me that half the money for the stolen beef went to you for fixing the deal. I'm aiming to see that that dinero gets back to the men that owned the beef."

"You're going to be disappointed," Brett said. "You see, this business worked out pretty well for me. I don't need my three boys any more, and now that they're dead they can't talk. You won't talk, either, because you'll be dead, and I'll tell folks you and Curly rubbed each other out."

It might be bluff, or it might be guts, and again Lance was bothered by the fact that

Brett should be afraid and wasn't. He said, "Get the safe open, George."

Shrugging, Brett rose and crossed the room to the safe. It took a little time to open it. Watching him closely, Lance thought he had a gun cached inside, but if he did, he made no effort to get it. He pulled the heavy door open and stepped aside.

"Come and get it if you can walk that far," Brett said easily. "A nice piece of money, enough for me to build a dam, which has been an ambition of mine for a long time. I'll close every rancher out north of the line before the first of the year."

Lance did not move. Something prodded him in the small of the back as Kitsie said, "Get your hands up, brother. Get it over with, George. You've had your fun."

"Better do as she says, Lance." Brett was smiling genially. "Yes, I've had my fun. You know, I never really aimed to marry Nora. She served her purpose admirably. Folks never guessed about me and Kitsie. Now with Dave gone, we'll be able to get married."

The gun muzzle pressed harder against Lance's spine. Kitsie said in a low voice, "I'll kill you if you don't get those hands up fast."

He slowly raised them, watching Brett savoring his moment of triumph. Lance said, "She'll double-cross you like she did Dave."

Brett shook his head. "No. We want the same thing; we make a good team."

Kitsie had moved away from Lance. She said, "Are you going to do the job?"

Brett had drawn a gun from a shoulder holster. "I'll finish it now."

Time, Lance thought wildly, anything to buy a little time. He was remembering the horse that had been behind him on the road. Nora, maybe, or Bill Seeley. He shouted, "George, you're a fool. I don't know why you dragged Kirk into this."

Brett laughed softly; his gun barrel lowered slightly. "That's where I was smart. Nora balled things up for me by fetching

you home, so I had to get rid of you. If you were as crazy as you used to be, you'd go hightailing out to the Star K and get yourself plugged. On the other hand, if you went home, I figured you and Dave would have a fracas. You'd beef him, and that would make rope bait out of you."

"You missed both ways," Lance said.

"Not exactly. All I've got to do is put a slug in you and—"

From the doorway behind him, Lance heard Nora scream, "Drop your gun, George."

Lance dived flat on the floor as Brett's gun swung up and roared. The slug missed his head by an inch. He grabbed his gun as other shots sounded behind him, hammering against the walls of the little room. Brett fired again, but now, with his string run out, he was panicky and the slug was wild.

Lance tilted his gun up and let go before Brett could fire a third time. The slug caught Brett in the chest and slammed him back against the wall. His feet went out from under him and as he fell, Lance shot again, this time through the head. Lance got to his feet and turned. Kitsie was down beside the desk, moaning from pain and shock, left hand gripping her shattered right wrist.

Nora was leaning against the door jamb, her gun at her side, slack-bodied and white of face. Lance lunged toward her, thinking she was going to faint, but she shook her head, her eyes on Kitsie.

"I should have killed her," Nora whispered. "She's no good, Lance, just no good, but I couldn't do it."

"I'm bleeding," Kitsie screamed. "I'm bleeding to death! Do something for me!"

MEN had crowded in from the street, most of them sleepy-eyed and half-dressed.

"You'll talk before you get any help," Lance told Kitsie. "Talk up good and loud

so these boys will know what Brett was up to."

She began to curse him, her eyes on the dribble of blood that was flowing from her wrist. She said sullenly, "He hired some men to rustle the cattle so the ranchers couldn't pay him off. He wanted their lands so he could put in an irrigation project. Now will you get me some help?"

Lance took the sack of money from the safe, walked out of the office, his gun still in his hand. He said, "This dinero belongs to the men that lost the beef. I'll see they get it." He nodded at the hotel man, who was the nearest thing to a doctor in the valley. "Take care of her."

He went out of the store, glad to be in the fresh air again, glad to be alive. A cold sweat had broken out all over his body; his stomach felt as if it had dropped completely out of him. Wiping a hand across his face, he looked at Nora beside him.

"I guess your dad told you about Brett."

She nodded. "That's like you, riding off without telling me. I won't stand for it, Lance. If we're going to live together—"

"From now on you can have your way in everything, honey," he said. "Almost everything, that is."

"Almost," she said, smiling in spite of herself. "Well, I guess that's the best promise I'll ever get out of you."

Lance said, "I've got one more thing to say. I love you. Remember that when you get so mad at me you feel like putting rat poison in my soup."

"I will," she said, "but there may be times when you'll find a little rat poison in your soup, just a little."

"Between my wife and my father-in-law, I'll have an interesting life," he said. "A real interesting, dangerous life."

He stopped and took her into his arms and kissed her. This was what he had come home for. Home! A good rich word. It gave a different meaning to the future than the past had ever had.



Bob took two steps, and exploded his right fist in Ralls' face.

Blow, Devil Wind!

By FRANK P. CASTLE

Three deadly killers were hard on Bob's heels, but he had no time for them now—he was much too busy fighting off the new trouble that rode the restless satana wind.

THE wind was half a gale, and it seemed to be blowing off the back furnace of hell. "A satana," the hostler in Brad Fallon's hotel stable at West Pass said learnedly. "That's what the Mexicans call it. A devil wind."

Bob Leggett grunted. He was tightening

his horse's latigo. In a minute, probably, he would loosen it. This had been going on for a couple of hours.

"When it starts blowing," the hostler went on, "they take to their shacks, down below the depot, and chink up all the cracks. Don't stick their noses out again until it stops."

"Smart people," Bob said morosely. "If I had any sense, I'd go home and do the same thing."

He loosened the latigo and rolled a cigarette.

Three minutes. That was just about the time it would take. Three minutes to step out to the walk, head down to the hotel door, cross the lobby and walk upstairs to Christine Bright's room. But he wasn't going to do it. He was going to climb into saddle and ride out to his modest Lazy L spread and stop thinking about her.

If he could ever get started.

He tightened the latigo again. A man had to have some pride. After what had happened, he couldn't go back to her.

Bob went over it all in his mind again. Christine, neat and trim in her dark dress and white waitress' apron, staring at him in the dining room after he had patiently outlasted all the other noon customers.

"What did you say, Bob?"

"I was telling you about my place. Twelve hundred acres, good stock, all whitefaces. Plenty of water. Couple of more years, I ought to double my grass."

She nodded abstractedly. "I hope you do, Bob."

He gulped and braced himself. "You'd like it out there, Christine. I've got a big kitchen, everything fixed up nice. . . ."

This was the approach he had decided upon after a lot of painful thought—interest her in his house and its furnishings, and then pop the question. But she started to shake her head before he was even well started. He thought she looked regretful; he thought she had even sighed a little. But her head-shake was firm.

"No, Bob. I'm sorry. But you're too late."

That dinned in his head. Too late. Somebody had beaten him out. And he hadn't been able to find out who, because Fallon had come in right then to close up the dining room, forcing him to leave.

Past four now; he ought to be home already, helping his three hands with evening chores. He rolled another cigarette, unable to shake the thought that if he saw her again, talked fast and desperately, he might persuade Christine to change her mind.

A new spring buggy made a wide turn on the street and rolled into the stable. Only one man in the county owned such a rig, and he was driving it. Dave Marr stepped down.

He was a heavy-bodied man, past sixty, with bowed shoulders and caliper legs from a lifetime of saddle work. He owned the big Box M, adjoining Bob's place.

"Be back soon," he said to the hostler, and preened his gray waterfall mustache with the back of his hand. He had on his black suit, with a new shirt and a string tie; he reeked of bay rum from recent barbering.

Then he saw Bob Leggett and grunted, beetling craggy brows.

"What in blazes are you doing here, boy?"

"Waiting out the *satana*," Bob said sourly. Then he remembered something and grew serious. "Dave, that pesky stealing is continuing, on our north line. Four head, yesterday, driven up to Coyote Canyon; I found where they were skinned out and loaded into a wagon."

"Your stock, or mine?" Dave Marr asked.

"How the devil should I know? They're clever as sin at burying hides. But they were careless at leaving other signs. It was just like I've guessed, all along—Ralls Kimmer and his two cousins! You come with me and I'll show you."

"Not now," Dave said. "I've got some

urgent business now. See me later, Bob."

"What's more urgent than stamping on stock thieves? They're filling their pockets with cash at butchers' back doors, using our beef! We'll go right now."

"Later, I said!" Dave snapped, with sudden choler. "And stop arguing about it. I want to be home before dark. Got something I'm looking forward to, tonight!"

HE LEFT, and Bob's sourness returned. Give a beef thief any slack, and he would stretch it to the limit. Four steers yesterday, perhaps forty tomorrow. Maybe Dave could afford such losses, could let the matter rest while he attended to his mysterious urgent business. Bob Leggett couldn't.

And this was a hell of a time to have to do something about the Kimmers, with his nagging worry concerning Christine. . . .

The hostler sniggered at his elbow. "Didn't hear what was said, but I can guess. Saw how jumpy he was. No fool like an old fool!"

"What?" Bob said blankly.

"Say, haven't you heard? Fallon's spreading the story around. Marr is getting married—to that high-chinned gal who's been running the dining room for the past month! Don't blame her for leaving Fallon; he's got the notion that when he pays a waitress, he's buying squeezing rights. Fallon heard Marr say that he'd call for her at five."

Bob went out through the door and swung his long legs in big strides down the walk. The wind howled; shutters banged. Nobody on the street, where dust made a thick, swirling fog.

He remembered Dave's ten thousand acres, the number of cows he ran, and anger boiled up in him. An old fool, widower a dozen years, putting his wealth on the line to dazzle a girl. And a girl ready to be dazzled. Not the kind he had figured her to be; one, instead, who was shallow and greedy, looking for plenty of money and

comfort instead of love and a man whose future she could help build.

Well, let Dave have her. But Christine Bright was going to get an earful of what he thought about it!

Fallon was at his desk, a sly, waspish little man with a reputation for gossip that no woman in town could equal. He flapped his hands at Bob, speaking hurriedly and with obvious relish:

"Stick around and watch the fun, Leggett! Marr pranced in here, wanted Christine downstairs and ready to ride right now. But she's taking a bath, so he'll have to wait a few minutes. He ran out again, gabbling about buying a ring! Well, good riddance, far as I'm concerned. She was always lazy and shiftless, a headache to me."

Bob sank his fingers in Fallon's shirt front and lifted him up, almost over the desk. The man squawked wildly, eyes goggling. Bob stared at him, surprised by his own rage.

He remembered Christine, always clean and neat, with freshly starched cuffs and collars, a low-voiced, gentle girl, full of quick laughter. And not lazy; everybody said she was the best waitress Fallon had ever hired.

He released his grip, and Fallon slid down, clear out of sight. The hotel man came up again, slowly and fearfully.

"You talk too much, Fallon," Bob said, voice thick. "Way too much!"

He turned and walked unsteadily across the lobby, toward the hotel barroom. He had to damp down the splinters in his throat.

The constant roar of the wind, the oppressive heat—these things were bearing heavily on him. They must explain his still flaring rage.

Christine was gone, beyond all hope, as far as he was concerned. Dave had gone out to buy her a ring. It shouldn't be any of his business what a fork-tongued fool said about her.

And yet it was.

The barrroom was dark, with all windows tightly covered against the devil wind and the dust. Bob stopped at the end of the bar and ordered a beer. Then he looked in the backbar mirror and saw Ralls Kimmer. He was a mastiff-faced man, brutally ugly, but with wicked intelligence glinting in little, close-set eyes. Ralls showed him yellow teeth in a taunting grin, turned to wink at his two cousins, Clyde and Feg, standing with him, then looked at Bob again.

"Sure looks like you wasted your time and money, all those hotel meals you rode to town to eat, Leggett," he said. "But cheer up! I know her kind—loose lips and roving eyes; just wait a week or so, till she's tired of that old fool, Marr. Then go nosing around, and see how easy she is to warm up! But you'll have to get in line—behind me."

Bob took two steps, hooked his left hand into Ralls' shoulder, pulled him around, and exploded his right fist in his face.

Ralls was a big man, built like a bull, but he was lifted clear off his feet and slammed on his back. Clyde Kimmer swung a hurried blow. His knuckles skidded off Bob's cheek, and Bob slashed a forearm across the bridge of his nose. Clyde yelled in pain and grabbed wildly at the bar to hold himself up.

Feg Kimmer, the youngest, a boy with wild, evil eyes, cursed and made a showy pass at his gun. Then the boy was blinking in amazement and backing away as Leggett lifted his own weapon in a lightning draw.

Bob was somewhat amazed himself. The Mexicans said that the wild wind could put the devil in a man who went abroad in it. For a moment, now, the impulse to kill was almost overpowering. The *satana* was playing on his nerves like a jangling harp. But Bob caught himself in time. To know something and to be able to prove it were two vastly different things; these three were guilty of beef stealing, but if he tried to deal with them himself, now, it would be

looked upon by everyone as plain murder.

Ralls was thrashing in the sawdust, obviously intending to roll to his feet and spring at Bob as he came up. Bob stepped back, gun tilting down, watching him with a cold alertness.

With that muzzle lined at his belly, Ralls stopped, hand to his mashed mouth.

"Put your iron aside, Leggett!" he mumbled. "Then we'll finish this."

Bob shook his head. "Get out!" he said. "Out of West Pass—out of this country! You've beefed my last steer, you three!"

They were rigid, and the play of lightning calculation in Ralls' eyes focused to a murderous glitter.

"That just bought you a coffin, Leggett!" he said. "Go get yourself measured for it, right now—because we aim to fill it, quick!"

They started backing, through the door that opened on the lobby. It was his fight now, Bob thought, his alone, with no help from Dave Marr or anyone else. That unbearable rasp of Ralls' slur at Christine had been to blame. Not the way he had planned to handle them, and he knew Ralls' last threat came dangerously close to being a promise. But he couldn't seem to care, particularly.

BOB HOLSTERED his weapon and turned again to the bar. He looked with distaste at his beer, and shoved it aside.

"Rye," he told the wide-eyed bartender.

The whiskey scorched the dried membranes of his throat, but steadied him. He laughed aloud suddenly. There was a kind of galling, ironic humor in all this—his defense of Christine Bright, who was marrying Dave Marr for his money, and of old Dave, also; for Dave would have had to face the Kimmers sooner or later himself, and do something about their steals. Even his fatuous interest in Christine, the honeymoon he was doubtlessly anticipating, couldn't postpone that hard reality long. Now the burden had been removed from

his shoulders and saddled on Bob Leggett's.

Meanwhile, it was time to go. Time to head back to his own grass, wondering if the Kimmers would even let him make a start.

The lobby was deserted. The whole building was shaking before the wind's furious assault. Bob paused a moment, thinking of that wall of flying dust on the street that would close about him, maybe hide his departure from Ralls and his cousins. Then he shook his head. Not yet. He still had to see Christine. He went up the steep flight of box stairs to the second floor.

The first door to the right of the stairs was the bathroom, with a big stone tub inside. That door was open. There was an aura of moisture, a pleasant flowery scent, the damp imprints of small, high-arched feet on the splintery floor. The footprints led across the hall to a door that was directly opposite the stairs.

It was Christine's room. At first, Fallon had put her at the far end of a dark corridor, but a couple of days later she had insisted on moving. Maybe what the hostler had said explained that move, though it didn't quite seem to jibe with the kind of girl who would marry Dave Marr because he had ten times as many acres and cows as Bob Leggett.

The door to her room was partially ajar. He rapped brusquely, and Christine pulled it all the way open.

She had on a blue robe which clung

damply to her slender body, accentuating the firm curves of youth. Hair that was almost mahogany in color, with high-lights of red, tumbled about her shoulders. She had a brush in her hand, and she was angry.

"Fallon, I told you to stop bothering me!" Then her eyes widened in surprise. "Why, Bob! What in the world are you doing here?"

There was a dryness in his throat not caused by the wind, a pulse hammering in his throat. He fumbled off his hat. This couldn't be the girl who was marrying craggy old Dave Marr, he thought—the girl who had maneuvered so adroitly that nobody had known anything about the impending marriage until Fallon had spread the news.

"Christine, I—I just wanted to say that I hope you'll be very happy. . . ."

Blast it, this wasn't what he had intended to say! But it was the way he felt. He couldn't help himself.

"Why, I hope I will be very happy, too," she answered, sounding puzzled. "I hope you will be very happy, Bob. And I don't know any reason why either of us shouldn't be. . . . Oh! Your poor face!"

He stared blankly, not understanding her startled cry, until she came closer to him—very close—and touched his cheek with cool fingers. Then he remembered the punch Clyde Kimmer had thrown at him.

"It's nothing," he mumbled.

"Come on in," Christine said, and ran

AMAZING THING! *By Cooper*

SENSATIONAL NEW **TING**
CREAM FOR
FOOT ITCH
(ATHLETE'S FOOT)
- REGULAR USE HELPS
RELIEVE ITCHING - SOOTHES
BURNING BETWEEN CRACKED
PEELING TOES -
AIDS HEALING
AMAZINGLY!



FIRST
USED
IN HOSPITALS
NOW
RELEASED TO
DRUGGISTS
GUARANTEED

TING MUST
SATISFY YOU IN
A WEEK - OR
MONEY BACK!



EVEN IF OTHER PRODUCTS
HAVE FAILED TRY AMAZING
TING CREAM TODAY!
GREASELESS, STAINLESS
ALL DRUGGISTS ONLY 60¢ A TUBE



around the bed, one hand down to hold the robe's skirt in place. But Bob still had an instantaneous glimpse of sleek white legs, and gulped hard and looked up at the ceiling.

Maybe that was indicative of something, he thought—receiving a man in her room, wearing only a robe. . . . Something mighty scandalous, according to the strict morals of this country. But he had the strange, tingling feeling that she wouldn't have invited just anybody on in—only Bob Leggett.

Christine returned, bringing a damp cloth.

"Why have you got your head tilted back, Bob? Look down at me!"

He did, and could hardly bear it. Lips pursed disapprovingly, she bathed the bruise. Then there was a sudden, unexpected quirk at the corner of her mouth, and a dimple in her cheek.

"Was it a rough fight, Bob? And did you win?"

"Yes," he growled. "But there'll be another one."

"Of course," she said softly. "You were made for fighting—and to win your fights. I wish I could have seen this one, Bob. I wish I could have been there to cheer for you!"

He couldn't stand any more. He put his arms about her.

"Christine, you can't go through with it! Not Dave Marr!"

She placed both hands on his chest, pushing back but not entirely breaking the embrace.

"I've never seen you like this before, Bob; you're shaking like a leaf! And what's wrong with my going with Dave Marr? We'll be close neighbors then, you and I. You can come to see me any time you like."

He stared at her in stupefaction; the ugly words Ralls Kimmer had uttered thundering in his memory. Christine had her head tilted back, studying him anxiously, hands still against his chest, still allow-

ing his arms to circle her, with the wonderful warmth and softness of her body under his fingers.

Now he had the feeling that the direction of her thoughts had abruptly changed, that she had just become fully aware of the pressure of his arms. Her lower lip began to tremble. She seemed to be pleading with him to say something, but he couldn't guess what it was. The luster of Christine's eyes began to dull. She broke the grip of his arms and started to turn away.

The wind shook the roof as though about to tear it off, and there was a sudden wildness in Bob Leggett. His grass, the position he had worked so hard to achieve in this country, his good future—all of these meant nothing in comparison with Christine.

"You're coming with me!" he said hoarsely. "Right now! We'll get out of town on the five o'clock westbound. We'll forget all about West Pass and what you were planning to do with Dave Marr."

"Why, blast and damn you!" Dave Marr said, from the doorway.

HE STOOD there with shoulders hunched and head down, thickly powdered with dust, a righteous wrath flaring in red-rimmed eyes. A new quirt, fresh off a store shelf, was looped over his right wrist.

"Forcing yourself in on a sweet young girl!" he blared. "Playing fast and loose with her reputation! It's a good thing I was the one who found this door open!"

Christine ignored him. She was staring at Bob Leggett in amazement.

"Go away from West Pass?" she said. "But why should we? Bob, if you'll only say what you're really thinking!"

"Stop waving that quirt at me!" Bob snapped at Dave Marr. "Look, Christine, honey, I'm all mixed up—"

Dave yelled inarticulately and swung the quirt. It cut Bob's bruised cheek; he yelled also and slammed into Dave. The old

rancher staggered back, through the door and across the narrow hallway. He hit the top step, threw out both hands in a vain effort to stop and started falling, pitching over and over as he crashed down the stairs.

Bob had tried to grab him. Now he stared down after him in horror. A hundred thoughts flashed instantaneously through his head. Dave's many kindnesses to a young shoestring rancher who had found the going plenty tough—help lent freely, sage advice offered, credit extended and due dates on loans ignored. If Dave broke his neck, Bob knew he'd spend the rest of his life in bitter regret.

Dave hit the lobby floor like a sack of scrap iron, but rolled and bounced to his feet as though he had sloughed off twenty years in that wild fall. He looked up at Bob, face a wrathful purple.

"I haven't got a gun on me, but I'm going after one!" he yelled. "If there's a gut in you, be on the street in ten minutes!"

Bob put out a hand to the stair rail, starting to plunge down after him. Then he remembered Christine, and looked back.

She stood in the open doorway, face drained of all color, a hand to her throat.

"He—he didn't mean that?" she gasped.

"Sure, he meant it," Bob said. "And I've got to stop him before he gets that gun."

"Oh, no!" Christine cried.

He took the steps three at a time as he plunged down them.

What in all hell got into a man, anyway? Was it the devil wind, or just essential cussedness? Himself and Dave, the firmest of friends—with their differences, of course, like their disagreement over the Kimmers, which was the way of men—but now with a monumental quarrel between them that only gunsmoke could blow down, unless he could get to Dave in a hurry. That girl, with her witchery. . . . And even now, in spite of it all, his desire for her was, if anything, stronger than ever.

He swore anxiously, racing across the lobby toward the door that Dave had left open, with debris and trash of every kind funneling in from the street and a solid, unremitting blast of wind whirling papers up from Fallon's desk in a crazy rigadloon. Fallon was running toward the door also, to close it, but hauled up short with a look of gleeful malice. Bob put a shoulder against the man, spun him aside, and leaped out to the walk.

He stopped a moment, anxiety mounting. One quick instant to make a right guess. The stable, he thought; if Dave didn't have a gun on him, he might have had one tucked away in his buggy. Bob went that way in a hurry, with the wind behind to hustle him along.

And his guess was wrong. Dave wasn't in the stable. Bob turned and started back, working out into the street, an arm up before his eyes, squinting through the dust, at a loss now what to expect. Dave might have run into any place on either side of the street, yelling for a gun. He'd get it, of course—what Dave Marr wanted was instantly supplied in West Pass—and then he'd come stamping out of some doorway, probably heading for the street. Of this alone Bob felt reasonably certain. If Dave was set to kill a man, he'd do it in the open, face to face.

Bob was just below the hotel, with a snap decision that Lewton's Store was probably where Dave had gone, considering Lewton's stock of handguns, when powder exploded in a heat lightning flash in an alley between the West Pass bank and Graney's Hardware, off to his right and twenty feet ahead. White hot pain streaked across Bob's left thigh. Knocked off balance, he fell awkwardly sideways, with a feeling of bitter anger. Dave had hidden out, after all—had retreated into that dark alley and had tried for a quick, killing shot at him from cover.

A second shot barely missed him as he was going down; a third spouted clods in

his face. He had his gun clear by then, but hesitated a moment, and the man in the alley showed himself. It wasn't Dave Marr at all, but Clyde Kimmer, venting a wild, exultant yell that sounded like a signal. Bob fired instantly, hit him just above the belt and sent him staggering up the walk, to crash heavily over a bench in front of the hardware store.

Bob twisted his head then for a hurried look around, and saw Feg Kimmer behind him, out on the walk in front of the hotel, a gun chopping up and down flashily in his hand as he began throwing lead. His first shot blew off Bob's right boot-heel, and Bob rolled desperately, with Feg's shots pounding around him like hail.

HE CAME up to one knee as the boy emptied his weapon and dropped it, drawing from his left side and executing a showy border shift, Colt flashing from left hand to right hand. Bob pulled trigger and hit him in the chest just as that right hand grasped the iron, and Feg stumbled forward in a crashing fall.

It had all happened in the time a man might use to draw two long breaths. Bob stood unsteadily, shaking with a rage that was directed at himself, for having let those two have this chance at him. But it was no time for lengthy self-recrimination. He looked hurriedly for Ralls Kimmer. The big man was not in sight. But he must be here, too, somewhere close. . . .

Dave Marr seemed to appear from nowhere, coming up the middle of the street. He was leaning into the wind, bandy legs moving fast, a gun rocking in a leathery fist, head swiveling from side to side in startled astonishment. Bob put out a hand, palm forward.

"Stay back, Dave!"

Then he saw Ralls, over on the hotel side of the street, coming out of a doorway with a short-barreled saddle gun. He was flipping it up, jerking down its lever, with a bitter grimace. His cousins had moved too

soon, Bob thought; Ralls had set a trap meant to center him in a murderous triangle of fire, but Clyde and Feg had sprung it by being too eager for his blood.

There was no time to point or cry a warning to Dave. Bob snapped a shot that streaked close to Dave's head and scored a glancing hit on Ralls, who threw up his rifle, fired wildly at the sky, and staggered back into the doorway. Then flame blossomed at the muzzle of Dave's gun, and Bob felt a gigantic blow against his side. He went down again, the breath driven from him.

Not Dave's fault, he thought; that close, the old man had thought he was firing at him, and had pulled trigger instinctively.

Dave came up slowly and stood over him, a look of puzzled concern on his face.

"Where'd I tag you, boy?"

"Across the ribs—I think," Bob said raggedly. He still couldn't breathe, and feared for his lungs.

"And all because of a woman!" Dave said. "Or was it this cussed wind? I'm damned if I quite know."

A thin warning cry sounded through the *satana's* tumult. It came from Christine at the hotel door. She had put on a dress, but her still unbound hair was like a wildly snapping banner. She pointed, caught up a long skirt about slim legs and started to run.

Ralls had pulled himself erect and was coming out of the doorway again, staggering, teeth gritted as he struggled to tilt his rifle up. Bob swore and began to rise. Christine was running down the walk, straight at Ralls. Dave put a hand on Bob's shoulder and shoved him back.

"This one is on me," he said, faded eyes bright. He started at his bandy-legged stride toward Ralls Kimmer.

The big man fired and he shuddered, but kept on. Now Christine was there, jerking at Ralls' arm. He slapped her angrily aside, and tried to cock his weapon again. Dave started shooting and kept it up, pouring

lead, slamming Ralls flat and nailing him to the walk. Then Dave walked into a hitchrack. He folded down over its rail and hung there.

Bob scrambled erect, arm against his hurt side. He could breathe again, without pain; his ribs had only been scored by Dave's bullet. Christine came running to put the support of her young body against him.

"Get that hotel door open!" Bob said, pulling away from her. "I can carry Dave as far as the lobby."

"Like blazes you will!" Dave said, voice muffled. "Get me off of this thing!"

They stood him hurriedly on his feet. He spread his feet wide and snorted gustily.

"Got a hole through my brisket, but I'm so old and stringy I ain't even bleeding much!" He looked at the bundle of torn rags that was Ralls Kimmer, and grinned at Bob. "Mighty lucky for you I was handy to pull you out of that tight!"

"Why, you pesky old hardhead!" Bob said scornfully. "If you'd stayed back, like I told you to, you wouldn't even be hurt!"

"Shut up, both of you!" Christine cried.

They stared at her. The girl's eyes were sparks of snapping anger.

"Bristling at each other, sticking out your chests like pouter pigeons—and me almost dying with fear a minute ago for both of you!" she said. "Now, what are you going to do? Just walk away and forget me?"

"Well . . ." Bob said uncomfortably.

They were back at the beginning again.

She pointed a quivering finger at Dave. "Tell him why I was going with you, Mr. Marr. Tell him fast and plain, so he won't jump to another of his quick conclusions!"

Dave blinked. "Why—I was just hiring you as my housekeeper and cook, girl. Felt a craving for female victuals before I cash my chips—for some frilly curtains at the windows and the sound of a woman singing in the kitchen again."

"You told Fallon you were going out to buy a ring!" Bob snapped.

"Yeah. I did. When I sink a thousand dollars in a prize bull, like I did yesterday, I aim to ring his nose quick!"

There was a singing in Bob's ears. Pleasant music. . . . But it was no time for gratification. Christine was in front of him, fists on hips, and her anger was still high.

"All you had to do was ask, and I would have told you!" she cried. "How I quit Fallon this morning, and Mr. Marr was there and heard me, and came up to my room a few minutes later to offer me a job. When you came in at noon, after Fallon begged me to serve one more meal, with your talk about your ranch and fine kitchen, I thought you were trying to hire me, too. If you wanted to marry me, why didn't you say so, instead of causing so much trouble and yelling about running away?"

Bob circled her with his arms, as the singing grew louder. She slapped at him, but not very hard.

"Now, honey!" he said. "I acted crazy, sure. I thought it was the wind. But it wasn't. I just wanted you more than a man ever wanted anything!"

"Well," Christine said, all anger instantly gone, cheek against his, "you've got me."

It may have been three kisses later, or five, when Dave indignantly cleared his throat.

"Leave me to do everything—collect guns and see what shape those three coyotes are in," he grumbled. "Danged if I don't think they'll all live—if you'd call a long spell in jail living. Beef stealing or attempted murder. . . . People coming now, so stop acting scandalous. Soon as we're patched up, we'll take my buggy home. And you've got to court the gal some, so I can get at least a few woman-cooked meals!"

Bob grinned, vastly content. The wind seemed to be reaching for a peak of demoniac fury, but he didn't mind. It would be behind them, pushing, all the way; they'd get there that much quicker to start the new life looming so brightly ahead.



Charlie rode it out, waiting for an arrow or the sudden smash of a bullet. . . .

Dodge City Fiddle

By JIM BOSWORTH

Four hundred and fifty miles he rode, through heat and dust and lurking Comanches—on a strange, incredible quest for his daughter.

WHEN Charlie Biggs rode out through his front gate, night dampness still clung to the mesquite, and the east was a smudge the color of gray smoke. He wrapped his poncho around close in the cool air, and settled back to the slow rock of the saddle. There was a long way to go, over the hot, flat land of the Panhandle, through Indian territory to Dodge City and back. Charlie turned and looked back at the house. Liddie stood in the thin light of the window and waved.

Four hundred and fifty miles to buy a violin for little Charlotte. . . . Charlie waved back, spurred the mare into a slow trot, and thought about it.

The trip wouldn't have been necessary, if he had been able to buy old Jake Harvey's fiddle. It was the only one around within a week's ride. But Jake hadn't even given him a chance to ask, and it was strange. Charlie couldn't figure him out. It was the second time he had ever called on Jake Harvey, and the bearded man had stood

there in his doorway and glared and said:

"Come snoopin' around here again and I'll shoot you."

The whole thing might not have come up if Charlotte hadn't walked over and listened by his window that night a couple of weeks ago... but maybe it was bound to happen sooner or later anyway.

Charlotte was a quiet little girl, a dreamer at ten. She did well with the book learning Liddie gave her. She played some and helped around the house. All in all, Charlotte was pretty much the little lady, except for sneaking off when she should have been in bed, going for walks when the crickets started singing, to build children's dreams on hill tops. They usually scolded her, but this last time when she went to listen to Jake play his fiddle, they couldn't....

He remembered when she had told about the music. There was a brightness in her brown eyes that made her look like some small, blonde angel. Music had put something in her face that hadn't been there before.

Charlie made a cigarette and watched the sun come up. He folded the poncho and tied it in back of the saddle.

It wasn't like a little girl wanting a doll. There was more than that, and Liddie saw it first. For a while, it seemed ridiculous that a child of ten, who had never heard music, could get serious notions about it. But Charlotte talked about violins beyond the point of childish whim. Liddie watched and mentioned it one evening.

"Looks like some fool notion she picked up out of the grass," Charlie said. "More'n likely she'll forget about it."

"I'm sure it isn't! She really wants a violin, and I think we ought to at least give it a try."

"I don't know, Liddie...."

"Charlie, think of what music could do for her. The opportunities! Why, it's an education in itself. It's a—a tool!"

"Tool?"

"Yes! Something to help make her life

a little richer. You know, someday she'll want to leave home. Charlotte can't stay out in the middle of nowhere all her life. I was just thinking how handy it would be if she could play the violin well enough to make a living."

"Make a livin'! Fiddlin' for money? That ain't for Charlotte. She ought to marry as soon as she's old enough! I ain't raisin' her to be a dance-hall gal, fiddlin' and showin' her ankles to ever' cowman in Texas! I ain't—"

"Now wait!" Liddie interrupted. "Marryin' is fine, but tell me, when was the last time you saw a human being go through these parts? Another thing, are you going to have her sit around in some town doing nothing until some young man comes along? That wouldn't exactly be proper either. She don't have to work in dance halls. I mean giving lessons to children, or maybe even playing in concert halls, if she's good enough. It's better than being a waitress or something like that...."

"She'd be beautiful in a pretty gown, with a lot of lace, her hair just right. She wouldn't look like me. I'm worn, and torn apart from grubbing in the ground, fighting this house.... Don't frown that way. I want to make something of this farm too. But it's not for her. If a child wants to learn about music—if she can better herself *that* much..." Liddie almost began to cry.

So there it began, and Liddie was right. It was hard, trying to build up a decent farm in that dry soil. The months went by painfully. Stooping in the hot sun, clawing, scraping, coaxing the rocky earth with water carried from the creek. Heat, dust, insects, and on the opposite end, the cold of winter seeping through the cracks. Someday it would end. He'd be able to stand back and say, "We've got us a farm, and a damn good'n at that!" But Charlotte would be grown before that ever came, and ready for choosing her own kind of life. If the violin would help, if only a little, then the trip to Dodge City made sense.

Liddie hadn't been happy about the ride, the two weeks it would take to get there, and its dangers. But Dodge City was the nearest town likely to have a fiddle, nearer than Fort Worth or San Antone. Two weeks away from working the farm was bad enough. It was the best they could do, in spite of the risks.

CHARLIE rode north, slowly. Getting away from the drudgery of chopping at the soil was a blessing, and he didn't worry about the dangers ahead. The only thing that bothered him was Jake Harvey... why he lived alone with a half dozen goats, and never spoke to anybody....

Toward nightfall, Charlie found a stream running clear and cold under a thicket of scrub-oak, and decided to pitch camp. He staked the mare out to graze and spread his roll.

When it grew dark, Charlie sat hunched over some coffee, staring into the shadows beyond the fire. He watched stars wink cold in the sky, and the sparks that trailed up to meet them.

It had been a long time since he'd lived like this. Twelve years. Not since he was nineteen and worked with the Lady Leg brand down on the Nueces, back in '61. That year was the one time he had gone up the Chisholm, on a cattle drive to Abilene.

The Chisholm was just a few days ride to the east. It stretched from near San Antone, and snaked all the way to Abilene. Country just like this, Charlie thought, and the memories came floating back.

Charlie had spent most of the drive with a broken leg in the lurching, jolting bed of a supply wagon. The herd had exploded into a stampede during a lightning storm one night, halfway to the Red River. And in the nightmarish ride to stop them, his horse fell and rolled with him. Consequently, most of what he had seen of the drive was framed by a curve of canvas and the square edge of a tailgate.

But he remembered hot, dust-choking

days, and a slow tide of restless horns and brown backs rolling over low hills, and the sound of thirsty bawling, in the afternoon. The smell of wet hide and muddy water was sweet, when they stirred up the big Red and forgot about the thick-tongued days before.

There was leathery old Chuck Eustis and the way he rattled his pans and dumped Mexican beans and beef in Charlie's tin plate, until it ran down his thumb. Shorty Frazier, the little, dried-up stump of a man who wouldn't retire. He told of fighting in the Texan army under Sam Houston, and knew Bowie, Crockett, and he was damned if he'd go home to get killed by a rocking chair... Charlie recalled when Shorty's heart finally stopped, and they left him under quiet, green grass, at the edge of the Cimarron....

There were laughing days, too, like the morning Jay Farney woke with a side-winder coiled on his chest. One of the boys ruined Jay's blanket, and burned his chest with buckshot getting it off.

He couldn't forget campfires glowing ruddy against the canvas spread of wagon tops, or the night herd whistling to the darkness and the cattle, how its sound came softly to touch him before sleep. That was the trail drive. He had gone once, and would never go again, but he'd remember it the rest of his life....

Daylight was a dim two hours away when Charlie broke camp. The Big Dipper still pointed its handle across the sky, and the far-off sadness of a coyote quivered in the silence.

Charlie swung in, feeling the stiffness of the preceding day's ride. Forty some odd miles, he figured, and perhaps four hundred to go. He spurred the mare to a trot. She squealed and laid her ears back in protest.

"Ah, behave yourself," he managed a grin, "you ain't the only one!"

He rode wrapped in the poncho, until the sun painted pink edges along the rim-

rock and fired clouds rising over the horizon.

Charlie watched the clouds build up slowly, until they blocked out the sun with a low, rumbling blackness. A short, heavy rain began to pound down and fill the air with sweetness. It hit with rolling gusts of wind, and he grinned as it tore at his shirtsleeves. Rain always felt good in the summer. It cut the dust and the heat, and it always seemed as if the sun-browned earth turned younger for a while.

The next afternoon was dry again, as if the rain had never come, but by that time it didn't mater. He had known, a couple miles before the river came into view, that the Canadian was there. The mare had lifted her head and sniffed eagerly at the hot wind. He could fill the empty canteens, swim, and be cool for a while.

Charlie let her trot down to the edge and plunge her nose into the cool, tugging water. Then he spurred her forward and felt the sudden buoyant lift as she stuck out into deeper water. On the other side, he turned her loose to graze, and sat on the bank, listening to the Canadian roll. It was good to be there. A third of the trip was behind, but he reflected soberly on the land ahead. Indian Territory, just beyond the the horizon.

It had been years since he had ridden through. The territory had changed some since, how much he didn't know. But the fact remained that he was traveling alone this time, not with the hoot and holler of a trail drive. The dangers of it crossed his thoughts like the wheeling shadow of a bird. Alone, a fiddle for Charlotte....

TIME fell behind, bright in the hot sun, sometimes dark with the thunder storms that rumbled across the flatness of the land. He was riding in a sunlit dream, in a great silence broken only by the mare's hooves and the thin whisper of wind, the high cry of a hawk in the distance.

Charlie took it slow and steady, tired

from the short nights and long hours in the saddle, until he came across the cold and scattered ashes of an Indian camp. It was days old, perhaps weeks. But from where he stood, Charlie could see a faint feather of smoke brushing a distant hill. He quickened the pace from then on, shortening the stops he had to make for meals, and riding far into each night. He waited for the inevitable, the quick, swooping attack, an arrow to come whistling out of the darkness—but the land was wrapped in silence. Quiet, and as unmoving as the first day of the trip. Tension scraped over his nerves like a stone knife, and time passed slowly. Too slowly. He felt the rifle resting under his knee, almost wishing they would come. But the traces of their living, the camps, smokes and dead ashes dwindled, until there weren't any.

When Dodge City finally jumbled the horizon, tension poured out of him like water out of a broken bottle. He had made it. Without trouble.

Dodge was full of the bust and yell of a new town. When he rode into its main street, it was like riding into the center of a three-ring rodeo. A long time had passed since he had seen that many people, heard that much noise, and seen so many buildings.

Charlie put the mare in a stable and walked down the street. It would be nice to look around, he thought. But that would come later. He wanted to find the fiddle first, and get some sleep in the hotel down the street, in a bed with a mattress.

He crossed over and went down the walk to a building with a sign that said "Dill's Haberdashery and General." Charlie went in, and saw an old man in a checkered vest sitting behind the counter.

"I'm fixing to buy a fiddle. You got one?"

"So happens I have. Let me show it to you."

He brought out an old case, opened it on the counter and showed Charlie an in-

strument with cracked varnish and nicks around the edges.

"One of those Italian brands!" The merchant offered in a low voice.

Charlie looked at it for a moment, and suddenly realized he didn't know the first thing about buying a violin. He hadn't expected to find one that quick.

"Well, is that what you want or isn't it?"

"Uh, well sure. But it looks kind of old."

"Oh, it was used a little. But hell, you don't want a new one! Age and use softens them up. Here, try it out."

"I don't fiddle, mister. This is for my daughter. How much?"

The old man closed the case with a snap. "Six."

"Six dollars! That seems like an awful lot. . . ."

"Violins don't just come natural, son. I can see you never bought one before. It's a reasonable price, and you might have plenty trouble finding another as good in town."

"All right. I'll take it. And give me a dollar's worth of cloth for my wife." He picked out a bolt of bright red.

When he left the store and walked slowly down the street, Charlie stared at the heavy make-up and gaudy dresses of the women. He admired bright, red-wheeled wagons that rolled silently and stirred up a seemingly more delicate dust than any wagons he had seen before. There were stores crammed with Eastern goods, and grocery stores with foods he had forgotten existed. Across the street stood a new theater, its red and yellow posters boasting of "All the Comedies, Shakespearean Sketches, presented by Marion C. Foxleigh, and Company." He wished Liddie and Charlotte were here. . . .

Leaving a saloon after a couple of drinks, he noticed the fading paper of wanted-notices plastering its outside wall. Charlie studied a dozen faces famous in that part of the West, and the small-reward men he had never seen. Charlie stepped back, rolled

a cigarette, and almost missed the half-hidden picture of Jake Harvey.

Old Jake! It was startling to see his face staring out from that wall, over the name of Tandy Calhoun—wanted for wounding a sheriff in Abilene, during a saloon brawl.

"Five hundred dollars reward," he muttered under his breath. "So that's why you act like you got a burr under your blanket."

Charlie went to the hotel, fell into bed and thought about it for a while. Jake was hiding from the law, and that explained why he resented their living only a mile from his shack. Maybe he didn't want to be friends with anybody, for fear his whereabouts might be given away. Charlie wondered if Liddie was all right. . . .

He sat up in bed, sudden fear creasing his heart with the desire to saddle up and get the hell back there. He scrambled for a boot and had it halfway on before he realized: Jake wouldn't know about him seeing the notice, and as long as he didn't know, there wouldn't be any trouble.

He thought about the five-hundred dollars reward, and about giving the sheriff the information. Five hundred was a lot, more than he'd ever seen in one pile. But the thought left a bad taste. Charlie didn't know why, but it didn't seem like good money. Something wasn't right about it.

Jake ain't bothered us. Ain't even said hello, and you don't know the reasons for the shooting. There's a lot of boys in Texas wearin' the same pants. It ain't your business. If he gets in your hair, deal with him in your own way. He rolled over and fell into a heavy sleep that lasted until the next morning. . . .

CHARLIE was eighty miles south when he met the wagon. A bitter, driving rain was falling, and the wheels and lumbering oxen cut deep into the soft earth. A bearded man held the traces, and when Charlie drew abreast, the wagon groaned to a stop.

There were two women, a young boy and

a sick man huddled in back. Something other than the grimness of the rain shadowed their faces. Tension, and the taut skin of fear. . . .

"Headin' south?" the bearded man asked.

"Yeah. Comin' from Dodge. Goin' home to Texas," Charlie told him.

The man nodded and eyed the violin and the load in back of the saddle.

"I'd advise trimmin' your load. You may want to travel fast when you get south of here."

"How's that?"

"Comanches. Had to pull into an arroyo and sit for three days to wait for a pack of them to move on. Camped only a half mile from us. Thirty I should say, and sign of more. They had a white man with them. There warn't a thing I could do, except'n to watch. . . . They didn't leave much of him. Better turn around and wait until y'got company."

"Can't do that. I ain't got time. But much obliged for the warnin'. I'll keep an eye out. So long."

The bearded man whipped up the oxen, and Charlie watched as he rode, until the canvas top of the wagon disappeared beyond a hill.

Comanches. He had known they were around. But from the way the old man talked, there were more than he thought. Charlie remembered the traces of their camps, the smoke. Most of the Indians had been herded on to reservations in the last couple of years. But a few die-hards from different tribes still traveled in small bands, plundering and killing when they had the chance. There the danger lay, and if the wagon man was right, it had been just a matter of luck that he hadn't encountered any in the ride north.

Charlie didn't make camp until long after sundown. He ate cold food rather than risk a fire, and though he was tired from the long ride, the sounds of night jarred his sleep into a fitful nightmare. Twice he saw the tortured body of a white man, twist-

ing in the dust, and twice he heard him scream. With it fresh in his ears, Charlie sat upright and stared into the darkness, to hear nothing but crickets singing softly. . . .

The long expected came at noon, the signal smoke rising from rocky hills to the east, so close that he could smell it. Charlie pulled to a halt. There was a wide, open plain rolling past those hills, no cover for several miles.

He felt his pulse quicken, and the cold fingers of fear rattled down his spine. There was no riding past this time. Charlie turned and backtracked to a gully he had passed. He led the mare in, tied her to a bush, and climbed to the rim, to watch and wait for nightfall.

The sun battered everything into a burning silence, until his own breathing roared in his ears. Except for the tall smoke rising, the hills remained dead in the heat, and after an hour, he decided he hadn't been seen.

The mare, restless and jumpy in the heat, nickered softly when Charlie crawled down from the rim. He gave her water in his hat, and drank a little himself. It helped, but the air still danced before his eyes, until they smarted with sweat and the strain of watching.

There seemed to be a low throbbing of a drum, pulsing, keeping time with the heat-ghosts shimmering over the distance. He held his breath to listen, but still wasn't sure. . . .

A jackrabbit provided the only movement to catch his eye, and after a while, even the mute voice of the smoke died. Charlie watched the sullen hills slowly turn red, fade to a deep purple, and then sink into darkness. The relief of cool air, and the first touch of an evening breeze brushed across his face. Still there was nothing, and when the first stars came out, he decided to chance it.

"Let's you and me get out of here!" he whispered to the mare.

Charlie rode quickly, silhouetted against

the moon and feeling the nakedness of the open. He kept his eyes on the hills and the land to the west. He gritted his teeth and wished he could stifle the mare's hooves that chipped at the rocky soil....

As the rocks loomed over his left shoulder, he could hear the beating of a drum and a weird chant echoing down the slopes. Then an answering cry of a coyote sounded somewhere near.

Charlie dug his heels into the mare's sides and urged her into a full gallop. The coyote seemed real enough, but he wasn't sure. It seemed odd that a timid, shy animal would voice his laments with noise in the nearby hills to interrupt his privacy.

The mare had just reached her stride when they were there, sweeping around him like a grass fire in a high wind. It was hard to tell if they were Comanches or Creeks in that darkness, but there were twelve or fifteen, riding painted ponies, cracking the night air with piercing cries.

Charlie pulled to a stop and waited for the next move. It was too late to pull the .45-70 from its sheath. There were too many. He raised his hand in the sign of peace.

A TALL, bronzed man came forward, rigid, poised in unfriendly dignity. The cold contempt of his eyes ignored the raised hand, and his sorrel jostled the mare, but Charlie held his ground. He tried what he could remember of sign language, but that was ignored also.

At a signal, one of the younger men cut the fastenings holding the saddle bags. He rode back to the others, holding his prize high like a trophy. The contents scattered among them, and Charlie felt the slow flush of anger as one cavorted around the edge of the band with the brilliant red cloth draped over his lithe figure. Another sniffed at the food, spilled it on the ground, and rattled the trinkets admiringly.

The leader eyed the black fiddle case hanging on the saddle horn. Charlie grabbed

for it in sudden, raging despair, but a sharp blow from a lance shaft cracked against his skull. He slumped over the horn, clutching his head to ease the pain tearing behind his eyes....

They were milling around, shaking their rifles at him, when Charlie was able to sit up. He watched their cruel, expressionless faces twisting in the moonlight, and heard the low, rapid words of their tongue. He saw the crushed back of the fiddle ground into the earth.

The twisting knot of savages exploded into action, filling the air with their screams. They jabbed at Charlie with their lance ends and rifle barrels, until the mare reared up and panicked. She spun around and ran at full tilt through the blurred circle of riders. Charlie flattened down over her neck and rode it out, waiting for an arrow or the sudden smash of a bullet to knock him out of the saddle. It never came. Instead, the cries died away, and the Indians were gone, as suddenly as they had appeared.

He stopped and listened, feeling weak and sick, wondering why he was still alive. A thin splinter-moon edged into the sky.

They traveled slowly until night paled in the east. He felt the stiffness and fatigue of long riding, and the ragged edge of failure. It wouldn't be long before he'd be home facing Liddie and the child, with nine hundred miles of useless, wasted riding behind him. The tortures of heat and thirst, fear, and the great emptiness of distance—they had all been for nothing....

Jake's shack was dark in the thin light of evening when Charlie rode by and stopped. He remembered the notice on the saloon wall, and an idea came. Maybe old Jake was the answer; maybe he would trade a fiddle for freedom.

He tied the mare to the gate and walked slowly through the yard, remembering the man's promise to shoot. Jake's goats bleated inanely behind the shack when he drew his revolver and pounded on the door.

"C'mon out, Jake!" Charlie stepped to one side of the door. "Come out with your hands clean!"

There was a groaning noise, an unsteady fall of footsteps, and the door opened. Jake Harvey was pale, weak, and it shone in his eyes like a fever.

Charlie said, "I lost my fiddle to the Indians, Jake! But I have an idea you'll sell yours now. If you're smart you will, because I know—"

"I already gave the fiddle to your little girl," Jake interrupted.

"You what?"

"Your woman treated me for snakebite. That girl of yours sneaked up to hear the fiddle and found me damn near dyin'. Went and got her mother. And after I acted so mean to you folks, too. That's what I call bein' real neighborly."

"You mean—"

"Would you mind puttin' that iron down?" Jake cut in. "I mean I'm goin' to act like a human bein'. I guess I had things figgered wrong. I got an idee you know the reason why I was runnin' from you folks. Well, I ain't runnin' no more. It's been damn lonely, and I'm gettin' pretty old to

be actin' like a skillet-spanked bear. Everythin' is up to you now, whether I stay or go."

Charlie holstered the revolver. "I don't know what you're talkin' about, or why you should go."

The old man scratched a rib and a twinkle came into his eyes.

"Well, just to put your mind easy anyway, that thing that happened was an accident."

"You're out of your head, Jake! And about that fiddle. You'll miss it, won't you?"

"Oh hell, Charlie, that's all right. I'll get along without it."

"Well, how about comin' over often and playin' it?"

"I don't know. I gave it as a gift, not a loan."

"You could give Charlotte lessons, and sort of demonstrate it to keep her interested."

"Well, reckon I could, at that. Is that a deal?"

"Sure, Jake. Now get back to bed fast, before you break that fool neck. We'll see you in the morning."



Juniper Flats figured it could trust the new marshal, Tom Ewell, even if he was just fresh from the owlhoot. Who wouldn't keep honest for a dollar a day and found . . . plus a hangrope bonus for Tom, if the bank was looted!

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GIVE A MAN

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There was a muffled grunt, and then a gun flamed in return.

A GUN!

*His town was dying around him from one man's
tyranny and greed—and he couldn't lift a gun to
save it!*



CHAPTER 1

Poison Peace

STEVE HARDING glanced at the list in his hand, then reached for two cans of pears on the shelf above the long counter. The list had been left by a rancher who was in town for the day, and who would return later for his order. Steve crossed off the pears and moved along to fill the next item on the list.

"Buell Newbold's good for Topango," Chad Owen was saying in his gentle tone. "There's no trouble any more. The town's been real quiet since Buell Newbold moved here. Say what you want to about Buell's friend, Marshal Hammer, but you got to admit he keeps the town real quiet."

Steve took down half a dozen cans of beans to add to the order. He said, "What about Sam Kazee and Clyde Morehead?"

Chad Owen shrugged. "Well, what about 'em? I'll admit both of 'em are pretty tough jiggers—but what about 'em? Buell Newbold keeps that pair in line."

Syd Morton demanded angrily, "Steve, what's got into you! You been dead set against Buell Newbold ever since he came here. What is it you got against him?"

Steve Harding juggled the half dozen cans of beans. He felt his own anger start to rise. Why couldn't any of them see what Buell Newbold was doing to the town?

The two older men were sitting in front of the cold stove, in the chairs that were

always there. Syd Morton, the small, irascible, white-mustached owner of the livery barn and feed store. And Chad Owen, the fat, bald owner of the Topango Hardware. Steve shook his dark head. It was a senseless argument. Trying to show that Buell Newbold was a danger to the town was like trying to prove that the sun rose in the west.

"Knew your pa real well," Syd Morton was saying. "Him and me and Chad here—we helped build this town. Too bad how he got cut down in his prime. Topango lost a real good man."

Steve said sharply, "And I'll bet he'd have been dead set against Buell Newbold too, Syd. He'd have seen what was happening here. And you'd have all listened to him, too!"

Syd Morton bristled. "Mebbyso, Steve. We all respected his judgment. But he won our respect the hard way. By fightin' for it. By fightin' for the things he believed in. I don't see you ever fightin' for anything!"

The rebuke was like an open slap. The whole town knew that Steve was opposed to violence. That he never carried a gun. Steve clenched his fists.

Chad Owens put in quietly, "Just what is it Buell Newbold is doin' to the town?"

Steve added the cans of beans to the order. "I'll tell you what he's doing, Chad. He robs the boys who ride up with the Texas herds. He robs them blind. One of these days the trail herds will quit coming here. Then what'll happen to Topango?"

"That's only what you say!" Syd Morton jeered.

"Now, let's not fight, Syd," Chad Owen said hurriedly.

"Fight!" Syd Morton muttered. "Steve here—he's never fought in his life."

Chad Owen tried changing the subject: "Steve, how's your ma?"

Steve felt his anger drain away. He moved around the counter, saying:

"There's been no improvement, Chad.

You know what Dad's death did to her."

For a moment there was a restless silence. The buzzing of a big blue fly seemed very loud. Carefully Steve measured out three yards of red calico. A feeling of helplessness had replaced his anger.

These men did not respect him; he knew. He was tolerated only because of what his father had been.

The mercantile had always been a place to sit and gossip. The chairs grouped around the stove had always served as an informal meeting place. Coming here to gab was a habit of long-standing with Chad Owen and Syd Morton and a lot of others. Before his father's death, Steve remembered, the chairs were always full. But it was that way no longer. Most of the old-timers had quit dropping in to pass the time of day. And this was a thing that hurt Steve deeply.

Syd Morton said stubbornly, "I still say Buell Newbold is good for the town. Ain't had my place shot up for a long time."

STEVE wrapped the calico and put it into the box along with the other merchandise. He rubbed his hands down along his white apron. Somehow he had to prove that he was right in his judgment of Buell Newbold. The life of the town depended on it.

"Things are quiet on the surface," he said calmly. "Nobody looks below. Maybe it's because all of you don't want to see what's really going on. Three years ago Buell Newbold came here. Now he owns the Orient, the Eagle, the Drover's Bar. He either owns or controls every saloon and dancehall in Topango. Pretty soon he'll own the whole town."

Syd Morton grunted. "I get it. He's building a new general store to run competition to your place here. That's why you've got it in for him."

"Now, Syd—" Chad Owen began helplessly.

Steve flushed. Syd Morton wasn't being fair. The reason for Steve's opposition to

Buell Newbold went much deeper than that.

"Let's look at what happened to John Traynor only last month," Steve said. "He's disappeared—and he isn't the first. John Traynor won a lot of money at the Orient and then he wasn't seen again."

Syd Morton glared. "Are you suggesting that Buell Newbold killed him?"

"Or had him killed."

"That's a pretty harsh accusation, Steve! What proof have you got?"

Steve said, "I just know."

"You don't know anything of the kind. Probably he just decided to ride away with his winnings."

Slowly Steve shook his head. He had talked with John Traynor. John Traynor wasn't just another saddle bum.

Topango was a trail town, hub of the big cattle drives from the great Southwest. John Traynor had come here with the firm intention of setting himself up in business as a cattle buyer. He had even started dickering for a piece of ground down by the tracks for a loading pen. Then he had got into that poker game at the Orient. His luck had run high—and he had disappeared.

Syd Morton said harshly, "If you're so sure, why not take your story to the law?"

"I did," Steve admitted. "Marshal Hammer laughed at me."

"Well, I can't say as I blame him."

Steve said, "Marshal Hammer is Buell Newbold's man."

"So what?"

"Buell Newbold's games are crooked."

"Have you ever been cheated?" Syd Morton asked.

"Well—no," Steve admitted.

Syd Morton stamped angrily to his feet. "I've had enough of this, Steve! And mebbe I've had enough of you, too! You don't like Buell Newbold, and I reckon that's your privilege. But you got no call to run him down all the time. Your pa was different. He believed in tellin' a man what he thought of him to his face!"

Steve didn't answer. In the restless si-

lence, he listened to Syd Morton stamp out. Steve said quietly:

"He won't be back."

Chad Owen coughed. "He's right, Steve. I never like to see trouble, but if you're so sure about Buell Newbold—well, it seems you ought to do more than just talk about him behind his back."

Steve went to the window and looked out at the dusty street. He watched Syd Morton stride angrily into the Orient. A helpless feeling, a sense of frustration, took hold of Steve. What could he do? How could he go back on that solemn promise he had made his mother—never to fight?

From up the street came the rapid clatter of hoofs. A gun banged skyward. In the saddle swayed a tall, redheaded youngster, yelling a challenge to the town. In a flurry of dust he hauled up in front of the Orient.

"Teal Bascom," Steve said. "Hoorawing the town."

Chad Owen said, "Wild Jack Bascom's boy. They just brought the Big Seven Pool herd up from Texas. I've known Wild Jack for a long time."

The tall redhead slid out of the saddle. A six-shooter in either hand, he strode across the board walk. Watching, Steve grinned a little. This was like Topango had once been.

At that moment fat Marshal Hammer stepped out of the saddle-shop next door. There was a leveled shotgun in his hands. His voice carried clearly:

"Drop them guns, Teal! Drop them guns, or by the eternal, I'll let you have both barrels!"

Teal Bascom grew roots. Slowly he swiveled his red head. For a brief moment he stood there unmoving. The doors of the Orient flew open and a crowd boiled out to see the excitement. Cowboys and dancehall girls and drifters. Steve recognized the new entertainer who called herself Flossie Flame. Buell Newbold appeared, flanked by Sam Kazee and Clyde Morehead, his two satellites. Marshal Hammer gave another

order. The sixguns slid from Teal Bascom's fingers.

Marshal Hammer said loudly, "You're under arrest, Teal."

The crowd waited in silence. Clyde Morehead, thin and dark, stepped forward and picked up the two sixguns. The sheriff accepted them, then jammed the shotgun into Teal Bascom's back and began marching him toward the jail.

It was over. The crowd began pushing back into the Orient.

"You see, Steve?" Chad Owen said simply. "We have a quiet town now. No busted windows. No trouble. In the old days your pa was always putting in new windows. Buell Newbold and his crowd—they keep things peaceful."

CHAPTER 2

Hombre, Take a Dare!

STEVE completed the order he had been filling. Chad Owen had gone now and everything was quiet. He checked the list again and then added up the total. Then he remembered the rancher had two children. He lifted the glass lid of a candy jar and filled a striped paper sack with peppermints. He didn't add the candy to the bill.

Quick footsteps reached his ears. He turned to see the girl who called herself Flossie Flame hurrying across the floor toward him.

He was struck by her beauty now, just as he had been struck by it the first time he had seen her. That had been three days ago, when she had come to town. He had seen her going into the Orient.

She leaned over the counter. She was wearing a brilliant red dress. Her name, Steve thought, fitted her well. She was like a shimmering flame.

"You're Steve Harding," she said.

Steve was startled, wondering what she wanted with him. There was something

about her that seemed familiar. It was as if he had seen her some place before, though not in any honkatonk. As a matter of fact, she didn't look like a dancehall entertainer at all.

"For three days I've tried to get away to talk to you," she said swiftly. "I didn't want Mr. Newbold to know. My brother mentioned you in one of his letters."

Now Steve knew why she seemed familiar. Her features resembled those of John Traynor. She was the kid sister John Traynor had spoken off!

"You're Ellen Traynor," Steve said.

She nodded. "I haven't much time. So far as Mr. Newbold is concerned I'm just Flossie Flame."

"Why did you come to Topango?"

"Johnny wrote about the town," she said urgently. "He mentioned this man Newbold. When his letters stopped coming—well, I feared the worst. I didn't know what had happened to Johnny, and I had to find out for myself. I've always danced and sung a little. Through a talent agency I heard about a job at the Orient. I came West and—"

Steve said, "You can dance and sing more than a little. The whole town's been buzzing."

She shook her dark head quickly. "Please! I haven't much time. What do you think happened to Johnny?"

"Well . . ."

"You don't have to spare my feelings! His body—it was never found?"

"It was never found," Steve said carefully. "There's no proof that Buell Newbold had anything to do with his disappearance. Most of the people think—"

"I don't care what they think!" she said hotly. "I've been here only three days and I know already that Mr. Newbold is capable of anything. He's got everybody fooled—" She broke off. "I've heard you're the only one who is against him. Johnny wrote me that too." Again she hesitated. "I'm going to find out what

really happened to Johnny. I've got to."

Steve said, "You shouldn't have come to Topango. You don't know what you're doing."

"How can you talk like that?" she whispered. "Johnny was my only brother, the only family I have. Now he's gone. I'm going to find out what happened to him. And if what I suspect is true—well, I'm going to make certain the same thing doesn't happen to somebody else!"

Steve slowly shook his head. "It will. I know because I know Buell Newbold. What do you think you can do alone?"

Ellen Traynor said flatly, "That's why I wanted to see you. Johnny liked you. I thought maybe you would help."

"No," Steve said. He felt his body stiffen. "No," he said again. "We can't buck Buell Newbold. It would mean a fight."

"What's wrong with a fight?" she asked. "There have always been men who were willing to fight against wrong."

Steve thought again about his promise to his mother. "No," he said once again. "I'm sorry."

Harsh lines of anger came into her face. Her voice came raggedly. "I'm sorry I bothered you, Mister Harding. I didn't expect you to be afraid. So all I'll ask is that you just don't mention any part of this conversation."

Helplessly Steve watched her depart. She thought he was afraid of Buell Newbold. That was what everybody thought. Perhaps it was true. He asked himself the question: Was he afraid?

And then he knew he couldn't answer. He had never fought—not the kind of fight he would have to wage against Buell Newbold. And he asked himself: *How can a man know if he's afraid until he's put his courage to the test?* There was no answer to that.

A CUSTOMER came in and Steve went through the motions of waiting on her. His mind was still filled with the problem

of Buell Newbold. It was a problem that went deeper than John Traynor, for his disappearance was an effect and not a cause. It was what Buell Newbold would do to the town that really counted.

Later, Wild Jack Bascom stamped in.

"Howdy, Steve. This damn town! Marshal Hammer juggled Teal a while ago."

Steve said, "I saw it."

Wild Jack Bascom bellowed curses. He was an old man now, with signs of hard frontier life in his face. His skin hung loosely on his powerful frame, but his faded eyes still held a sparkle.

"This town's wore out," he bellowed.

"What?" Steve said.

"It's wore out its welcome, anyway. Things were different when your pa was still alive. And before Buell Newbold took over. Hell! There's another railhead we can reach. It's further—but from now on I reckon we'll be driving there." He peered keenly at Steve from under white, bushy brows. "You know what that means to a town like Topango?"

"I know."

"Why don't you do something about it?"

"Do what?" Steve asked.

Wild Jack Bascom said, "That's a question your pa wouldn't have had to ask. A little vigilante law might help."

Steve said, "No."

Wild Jack Bascom sighed. "Buell Newbold's plenty smart. I reckon he's got most of the townfolk behind him. It's the cowboys, the drifters, the punchers who ride up with the trail herds—they are the ones he clips blind. I reckon I'm in a position to know. We've driven our herds up outa Texas and then left plenty of our money linin' his pockets." He turned away. "See you later."

"How about coming out to dinner to-night?"

"Can't make it tonight."

"Tomorrow?"

"Wouldn't miss it!" bellowed Wild Jack. "I ain't ate your ma's fried chicken

and her huckleberry pie in a coon's age!"

Late in the afternoon the rancher returned for his order. Through the window Steve could see the big farm wagon standing in front, two youngsters sitting on the high seat. The oldest wasn't over five. He was sitting there, the reins clutched in his plump fists, pretending to be driving the wagon.

It happened fast. A cur hound snarled and snapped at the off horse's heels. The horse reared up and then the team started to run.

For the moment the street seemed deserted. Steve acted without conscious thought. He vaulted the counter, hit the door in half a dozen strides, then set out in pursuit. The wagon hadn't picked up much speed yet. Steve leaped into the seat and sawed on the reins until the frightened horses stopped.

The rancher was weakly thankful. "You acted fast. There I was standing with my teeth in my mouth and—"

"Forget it," Steve told him, smiling.

A small crowd had gathered in front of the Orient. Steve saw Ellen Traynor's face. There was a puzzled look in her eyes, as if she couldn't reconcile his last action with his refusal to fight Newbold.

Kerosene lamps were beginning to come on now. Steve prepared to close up for the night. He had just put the day's receipts into the safe and spun the dial, when the door opened. Steve turned. Buell Newbold was standing there, flanked by Clyde Morehead and Sam Kazee.

Buell Newbold was a big man, hard and muscular. There was an uncompromising arrogance in his eyes. His teeth were even and white in his bland face.

On his left was Clyde Morehead, thin, dark and wiry. Clyde Morehead owned a small ranch along the Topango River, and he was the nominal owner of the Drover's Bar. A dangerous man, with his twin guns slung at his waist.

And Sam Kazee. Big and gross and

just a little dull-witted. A man whose heart was as black as the look on his craggy face. A man with primitive instincts who idolized his boss.

Buell Newbold said, "Stay here, Clyde. Let me know if anyone wants through the door." He gestured at Sam Kazee. Then he and Sam Kazee stepped forward.

"What can I do for you?" Steve asked.

Buell Newbold lit a dark cheeroot, holding it at a rakish angle between his white teeth. Sam Kazee laughed. Buell Newbold didn't carry a gun—not in sight, anyway.

"I'm going to break you, Harding," he said flatly. "You're in my way. I'm going to open up my new store and break you flat."

Steve said, "You didn't walk across the street to tell me that."

"That's a fact," Buell Newbold said, nodding. "I don't like the way you've been talking about me behind my back. Oh, I've heard about it! It doesn't worry me too much because nobody believes you anyway."

"Is that why you came over?"

"Yeah. You've been talking about John Traynor, too. I don't like that. The town ought to forget about him. He's gone away now and that's all there is to it."

"You'd like him forgotten, wouldn't you!" Steve burst out. "Well, I knew him better than anyone else here. He was here about two months before he disappeared."

Sam Kazee said, "Are you sayin' that Buell here had something to do with that?"

"That's what I'm saying," Steve told him.

Buell Newbold seemed unconcerned. "You'd better drop that idea right now, Harding."

For a moment Steve remained silent. There were three men against him. Steve had the normal amount of imagination, and it wasn't hard to guess what might happen. Still, he didn't feel anything like fear crawling inside him.

"He's yellow, boss," Sam Kazee said.

Buell Newbold shook his head. "Maybe, maybe not. Harding, I'm telling you to stop dragging up the subject of John Traynor. I want him forgotten."

Steve said tightly, "I'll talk about what I like whenever I like it."

"I'm a patient man," Buell Newbold said softly. "Your attitude will only get you into trouble."

Steve laughed. It was a strange sound. Buell Newbold looked a little shocked. Steve said:

"I can even tell you what you can do."

Buell Newbold stepped forward. He grabbed Steve's coat and jerked him forward. Newbold's eyes were hot. Sam Kazee hurriedly jerked out his gun.

"That's your answer, Harding?" Buell Newbold asked.

"That's it."

Stepping back, Buell Newbold said wickedly:

"Take him, Sam."

CHAPTER 3

The Fatal Promise

SHE was a small elderly woman whose dull, faded eyes made her look as if she were existing in a vacuum. It seemed to Martha Harding that she had stopped living when her husband was shot and killed in a gun duel three years before.

She had always abhorred violence, and the duel had been so senseless. Matt Harding and a man named Wilt Tanner had carried their political argument into the street of Topango.

To her, pride and honor had become empty words. Death was too great a price to pay for such abstract beliefs. Her husband had been true to his beliefs—and died because of them. The price was too great.

Now she stood staring down at her sleeping son. She looked at his battered features, and the only emotion she felt inside the cold shell of her body was self-pity.

She would have denied it flatly, sworn that she was the most selfless woman alive.

Steve Harding groaned hoarsely. Reluctantly one eye came open. He passed his tongue over his bruised lips. He had managed to drag himself home after the terrible beating, only to collapse inside the house.

"What time is it?" he asked.

"Midnight," she said grimly. "You promised me, Steven. You promised me never to engage in violence."

Steve said, "I didn't. It engaged me."

"Tell me what happened, Steven."

It was hard to remember. The beginning was clear enough. He remembered Sam Kazee hitting him on the head with the butt of his gun. It was the ending that was hazy. Buell Newbold had pulled him off the floor and battered his face unmercifully. Buell Newbold kept saying over and over, "Forget about John Traynor!" Steve knew that he had kept silent. They must have left him lying senseless on the floor.

Some of this he told his mother.

Afterwards she said, "You brought it on yourself, Steven. I've warned you about talking against Mr. Newbold. You hate him for some reason."

"You're against me too?"

She shivered a little. "How can you say that?" she asked, self-pity strong in her eyes. "But tell me this. Who donated most of the money for the new church?"

Steve said, "Buell Newbold."

"And who built the playground for the children?"

"You don't understand!" Steve said. "He's shrewd. He never bothers the people of the town. But find out his reputation along the trail."

"What is it?"

"All bad," Steve told her bitterly. "He's not content with half of what a man has in his pockets. He wants it all. He's like a spider, waiting for his victims to come to him. He's ruthless, predatory. I've invited

Wild Jack Bascom to dinner tomorrow night. Talk to him!"

She said, "I've never asked much of you, Steven. You promised never to fight."

"I promised never to carry a gun," Steve reminded her. "And that's a promise I've kept."

Tears came into her eyes. "Steven, your father was always a violent man. He lived by the gun and he died by it. He taught you to shoot when you were barely big enough to hold a gun. Now you're all I have left. All I ask is this. Try to get along, somehow, with Mr. Newbold. Temper your judgment. And don't try to fight him, Steven—you'll only be hurt."

Steve felt himself struggling helplessly with the things that were in him. He thought of Buell Newbold, and what was happening to the town. He thought of the way the town was against him, taking Buell Newbold's side. And he thought about Ellen Traynor, and what had happened to her brother.

A trapped look came into his eyes. He wanted to shout all these things aloud—but he found himself incapable of speech.

His mother was leaning forward, peering into his face. Trying to read what lay mirrored in his mind. Slowly a look of subtle triumph came into her eyes. For the time, at least, she had won.

And she still relished her sense of victory the next day. Steve had managed to drag himself to the store. Mrs. Harding was sitting in front of the parlor window, rocking, her thin hands folded in her lap.

She knew she was right. Even though she was aware of what the people of the town thought, she knew she was right. No price was too great if violence could be prevented.

A girl hurried up the street and turned in at the gate. Mrs. Harding frowned. The girl, now—she was that new entertainer at one of Mr. Newbold's saloons. What could a girl like that want here?

Primly she arose to open the door. A

girl like that! Well, she'd send her packing! A girl like that had no right even to walk in the respectable part of town. . . .

PURPLE twilight had come and gone, and now it was dark. Dinner was over. Steve and Wild Jack Bascom were sitting on the porch, while Mrs. Harding cleared away the dinner dishes. There was no moon but the stars were bright and cold.

Wild Jack Bascom said, "You ain't told me yet how you got that face. Looks like a herd of cattle tromped on you."

Steve shrugged his question aside and asked, "Is Teal out of jail yet?"

"Okay, don't tell me nothin'!" Wild Jack Bascom said loudly. "They let Teal out after he calmed down."

Steve tried a grin, which made his battered face hurt. "From what I've seen of him, that takes quite a while."

Wild Jack Bascom snorted. "Teal's got to tame down. I been figuring what he needs is more responsibility. That's why I put him in charge of the sale of the herd."

"That's a big job," Steve muttered. "I've heard it's the biggest pool to ever come up the trail."

"That's right," Wild Jack said with pride. "Teal's a good boy. I reckon a youngster has got to get the wildness out of his bones."

For a moment they sat in silence. Then Wild Jack began to chuckle. He said:

"I been stirrin' up a hornet's nest today, Steve. Talked to Chad Owen and Syd Morton and some of the other old-timers. They're all a pig-headed bunch. Told 'em that we weren't bringin' the drives here any more."

"Did they listen to you?"

"Did they listen!" Wild Jack snorted. "You damn well know they listened to me! What I told 'em hit where it hurt—in the pocket. All except Syd Morton, anyway. You don't have to draw purty pictures to show what happens to a town like Topango if the trail herds don't come here no more."

Steve said, "I've been trying to tell them—"

"Sure you have! And they wouldn't listen." Wild Jack Bascom leaned forward. "They're plannin' a meeting. A little vigilante law will save the town."

Steve shook his head. "That's not the way."

Wild Jack Bascom said, "It's as good as any way! Your ma brought you up hatin' violence. It's a purty theory. But what are you gonna do about a man like Buell Newbold?"

"Vigilante law isn't right."

"I tell you, Steve, any way is right against a snake like Newbold! There's a heap of difference between fightin' to hold what's yours and fightin' to take something away from the other fellow. One way is right and the other is wrong. What about that?"

Steve turned his head. His mother was standing in the doorway. He knew she had been listening. Her body stiff, she went back into the house.

He looked toward the street again, staring into the darkness. His eyes were flat. He felt trapped between the high walls of his mother's implacable will. There was nothing he could do. . . .

Suddenly the flat look was gone from his eyes. Starlight glinted on something bright. He dove out of his chair and yelled:

"Get down!"

He tried to drag Wild Jack Bascom to the floor. Out in the darkness a gun flamed raggedly, then flamed again. Wild Jack Bascom staggered, belowing curses. Falling slowly to his knees, he tugged out his own six-shooter. Another wild shot came out of the night. Wild Jack emptied his own gun into the darkness. Feet ran away and in the distance somebody yelled.

"The bushwhackin' son!" Wild Jack cried out. "Got me in the shoulder!"

Steve helped the old man up. From the doorway a voice said calmly:

"Bring him inside, Steven. I was at the

window when it happened. I think I saw who it was."

"Who?"

"Sam Kazee . . . Bring Mr. Bascom inside."

Steve helped the wounded man into a chair in the parlor. There was a crowd outside now. Steve joined it, returned a few minutes later.

"Nobody out there saw it," he said, watching his mother bending over Wild Jack Bascom. With swift gentleness she was pulling away the cowhide vest, the white shirt. Steve shook his head and repeated, "Nobody saw it."

"I did," said his mother.

Steve felt the old helplessness, the old sense of defeat. It seemed to get worse all the time. And he asked himself: *How does a man know whether he's a coward?*

"Fetch some warm water off the stove, Steven," his mother said calmly. "And some clean cloth for bandages."

Now it was done. Wild Jack Bascom was standing up, slipping on his bloody shirt over the thick pad of bandages at his shoulder. The bullet had only nicked the flesh. Mrs. Harding left the room.

Wild Jack Bascom growled, "This damn town!"

"He was after me," Steve said. "They're afraid I may know something that's dangerous to them. I think they'll try again."

"Steven . . ."

Steve turned to see his mother standing in the doorway. Her hands were behind her back. She stood there, a small elderly woman, her body no longer stiff, but pliant, her eyes no longer dead, but with something alive stirring in their depths. She said softly:

"I'm sorry, Steven. I'm sorry for what I've done to you."

Steve looked into her eyes. For the first time in months there was no self-pity in them. The dull faded look was gone.

"I've been wrong," she said simply. "Terribly wrong. All along I've thought

you'd be safe from harm if you didn't carry a gun. Now I can see how wrong that is. I've been terribly selfish." She hesitated. "A girl came to see me today. My mind was set against her, Steven, but I heard her out. She told me some of the things I'm trying to say now, but I didn't believe her. Steven—she's a grand girl."

"Ellen Traynor?"

"Ellen Traynor or Flossie Flame. Steven, tonight I heard you and Mr. Bascom talking. And I finally realized that I've no more right to run your life than Buell Newbold has to run the town. I've tried all along telling myself that pride and honor and justice are empty words—but now I know these things are real and good. There can be no decent life without them."

She brought her hands from behind her back. "Here's your father's belt and gun, Steven. He'd want you to have them. I know it was Sam Kazee who tried to kill you tonight. I see now that you can be killed no matter whether or not you're armed. Maybe you'll have to kill Sam Kazee before he kills you. Look into your heart for the answer."

CHAPTER 4

A Town Aroused

THE mid-morning sun laid a hot hand upon the town. Steve was busy unpacking crates of merchandise which had arrived late the previous day. Faintly, he could hear cattle bawling in the loading pens down by the tracks.

He was keenly aware of the unfamiliar weight of the gun at his hip, hidden by the white apron. It changed things. Sam Kazee wouldn't have dared to shoot down an unarmed man in public. But now he could pick his own fight. But at least, Steve thought, it would stop any further bushwhack attempt. Next time Sam Kazee would make his play in front of witnesses.

Wild Jack Bascom had already come and

gone, his bandages making a thick pad under his coat. He had said:

"Teal's closin' the deal today for the herd. Come tonight, we'll be shovin' off."

"When'll you be back?"

"That depends," Wild Jack Bascom said, scowling. "Mebbe never."

Steve was thinking about that now. Something had to be done to save the town. Perhaps it was already too late.

Ellen Traynor hurried inside, her eyes looking a little fearful. She kept watching the doorway and the street beyond.

"I had to see you," she said breathlessly. "I want to apologize for the way I acted yesterday. I went to see your mother."

"I know."

"She told me how she hated violence. She told me what she'd made you promise. She wouldn't listen to me."

"I think she did," Steve said quietly.

Ellen Traynor went on, "Now I understand why you said the things you did. I was so angry when I left here. Then I saw you save the lives of those two youngsters. It bothered me. I decided you weren't a coward after all. And yet I couldn't understand how you could refuse to fight against Buell Newbold, knowing what kind of a man he is and what he's done. So I went to see your mother."

Steve said, "Things have changed now."

"I've only got a minute." She touched his arm. "I know something is going to happen. Clyde Morehead disappeared early this morning. And Teal Bascom and Newbold and a few others are playing poker for high stakes in a back room of the Orient."

"Teal!"

She nodded. "He's winning now. It's the same set-up now as the time when Johnny disappeared!"

Steve said, "What can we do? You can't stop a poker game until you know for sure there's something crooked."

"I understand," she said swiftly. "I'll try to slip over later and let you know what's happening. I've got to go now."

Steve went back to his work. John Traynor had gambled at the Orient and won and disappeared. Perhaps the same thing was planned for Teal Bascom. Perhaps some variation. But what could be done about it?

Chad Owen came in. "Howdy, Steve. The town's getting a fire lit under its tail."

Steve straightened. His white apron slipped aside and the butt of his sixgun was visible for a moment.

"Gawdalmighty!" Chad Owen muttered. "Now I've seen everything!"

Steve said, "I understand Wild Jack Bascom talked to you yesterday."

Chad Owen nodded. "He laid it right on the line for us. It's not hard to see what happens to Topango if the trail herds quit coming here."

"How's everybody taking it?"

"Some still don't believe it, Steve. Syd Morton is a stubborn, knuckle-headed fool! He can't see any further than a few busted windows. There's talk about a vigilante committee. But Syd Morton is against it, and he packs a lot of weight."

Steve said, "Vigilante law is wrong."

Chad Owen shook his head. "I know how you feel about violence—"

"You don't know how I feel!" Steve said sharply. "I say that mob violence is wrong. But I don't say that *all* violence is wrong!"

"Is that a riddle?" asked Chad Owen dryly. "Are you planning to take on Buell Newbold and his mob by yourself?"

Steve said, "I don't know. We'll see."

There was a momentary silence, during which Chad Owen stared at Steve in puzzlement. Steve wiped his hands down along his apron. His palms felt sweaty.

"I haven't seen Syd Morton today," Steve said.

Chad Owen said, "He was pretty sore yesterday. I saw him riding out of town a while ago."

Since the day before yesterday, when he had got so riled at Steve Harding, a strange restlessness had gripped him. Now he was trying to shake it off. He had no definite destination. Sometimes just riding eased a man's soul.

He rode slowly, letting the big roan pick its own way. They had been traveling northward along the bank of the Topango River.

Syd Morton was unable to shake off his feeling of restlessness. He was still convinced that Buell Newbold was good for the town. There was no trouble any more. Not much, anyway. He had heard the rumor of Steve Harding's being beaten up, and later Wild Bill Bascom's being shot. Syd Morton put these thoughts out of his mind.

However, Wild Jack's threat was another matter. If the trail herds stopped coming here, Topango would be doomed. Syd Morton could see that.

But he was opposed to the talk of a vigilante committee. There was still no proof that Buell Newbold was guilty of any crime. Buell Newbold was good for the town. . . .

Syd Morton shook his head. He had a choice to make and it wasn't easy. The town looked to him for advice. Without his active support, all the wild talk about vigilante law would die out. To a large extent the success of any such committee rested on his shoulders. It was a difficult choice.

He reined in to let the roan blow. A short distance ahead was Clyde Morehead's small spread. Clyde Morehead was Buell Newbold's man. And suddenly Syd Morton wondered why Morehead bothered with the ranch at all. The thin, dark man spent all of his time in town.

The outbuildings were tumbled and rotten. Even the main ranch house was sagging. There was no stock on the place now, and weeds grew tall in the yard. In the past Buell Newbold and Sam Kazee and the rest had come out here upon occasion

IT HAD been mid-morning when Syd Morton left the livery barn in the hands of a hostler and rode away from Topango.

to fish or hunt ducks. But lately this had been given up.

Sitting there, studying the tumble-down ranch, Syd Morton caught the flash of movement behind the house and down along the river bank.

Syd Morton was a curious man as well as a stubborn one. He dug his spurs into the roan's flanks, riding through the broken gate and along the sagging fence to the river.

At his approach, Clyde Morehead spun around and his hands flashed to the guns hanging low around his waist. Syd Morton grinned and held up a wrinkled hand, saying cheerfully:

"You're a touchy gent, Clyde. Damned if you ain't."

Clyde Morehead relaxed. His eyes were bleak and expressionless. He grunted an answer that was wholly unintelligible.

He had been hard at work on an overturned skiff, caulking the seams that had opened in the hot sun. Syd Morton's surprise showed in his faded blue eyes.

"We been figurin' on a few ducks," Clyde Morehead said.

Syd Morton frowned, looking out across the broad river. This wasn't the duck season. His eyes came back to rest on Clyde Morehead again. For the first time he noticed the heavy piece of railroad iron, the rope lying nearby. A vague warning stirred in his mind.

He said, "I hear Teal Bascom wound up the sale of the Big Seven Pool herd this mornin'."

"Yeah? Did you ride clean out here to tell me that?"

"Seen Teal goin' into the Orient," Syd Morton said. "Reckon he got a wad of jack for that herd."

Clyde Morehead jerked out one of his six-shooters. "You better keep them ideas to yourself."

"Don't get proddy," Syd Morton said, grinning. "Now wouldn't Buell Newbold like to get his hands on all that dough!"

Clyde Morehead said threateningly, "You better ride on."

Syd Morton was silent. Jumbled thoughts had been creeping into his mind. Vainly he tried to arrange them into a pattern. At such times talking always seemed to help.

And now, quite suddenly, the pattern was complete: Syd Morton sat up straight in the saddle, wrath shading his face. Maybe he was stubborn and pig-headed, but he had a deep sense of the rightness of things.

"Judas priest!" he yelled. "This is just like the time John Traynor disappeared!"

Cursing, Clyde Morehead turned on him. And in that moment Syd Morton knew that he had talked too much. Here he was unarmed and . . . He wheeled the roan sharply, dug spurs into its flanks. Bending low in the saddle, he raced away along the river bank.

The gun blazed away behind him, the sound flat and loud in the hot quiet air. A slug whined past. Again the gun banged. The roan shuddered and squealed in agony. Two more shots. The big horse screamed and cart-wheeled into the river.

Syd Morton was thrown clear. The water closed over his head.

He hadn't been swimming for fifty years, not since he was a youngster. And never had he been called upon to swim for his life. He knew that Clyde Morehead would be running along the river bank, trying for another shot. He swam under water until he saw the dim shape of the horse above him. Lungs almost bursting, he came up on the off side of the roan, away from the river bank where Clyde Morehead waited. The horse was struggling weakly, blood from its wounds staining the water.

Syd Morton and the dying horse floated slowly with the sluggish current. Clyde Morehead was still running along the bank. Syd Morton rested, holding only his nose out of the water.

At length Clyde Morehead gave up the chase, sitting down and emptying sand out

of his boots. The horse was dead now. Syd Morton drifted on.

When he felt safe, he kicked away from the horse toward the shore. He pulled himself up on the bank and lay there panting. After he was rested he went in search of a horse to borrow.

His mind was made up now. All along he had been wrong. He was a stubborn idiot! Buell Newbold had always been a threat to the town. . . .

WILD JACK BASCOM burst into the store and bellowed, "Goddlemighty! Teal's got a bank draft in his pocket for a hundred thousand dollars!"

Steve said, "Did you look for him?"

Wild Jack Bascom nodded heavily. "He wasn't at the bar. They wouldn't let me look no further." He hesitated. "You reckon Teal's gamblin'?"

"I know he is."

"This damn town! I'll get my boys and we'll tear the Orient apart!"

Steve watched Wild Jack step into the saddle and ride away. He shook his head. It wasn't the way. Too many would be hurt. Too much time would be involved. Teal Bascom would be killed and then there would be no proof. . . .

Big Sam Kazee walked out of the Orient. For a moment he stood there, shading his eyes against the glare of the sun. His gun was slung low.

Steve felt a mounting tension. The rumor that he was wearing a gun would have spread. It would have reached Buell Newbold's ears. Sam Kazee was picking both his time and his place.

Sam Kazee let out his gunbelt another notch. Slowly he stepped off the high board walk into the dust of the wide street. Near the center he paused, kicking up dust with the toe of one boot.

He bawled out suddenly, "Harding!"

It was here, now. Calmly Steve stripped off his white apron. This was it. He checked his own gun and then moved

toward the door. Slowly he stepped out.

He felt no fear. He knew that this was simply the thing he had been expecting, the thing he had been waiting for, ever since he had donned the gun. And he asked himself the eternal question: *How can a man know he's afraid until he puts his courage to the test?*

For a moment he stood on the edge of the splintered walk, flexing his fingers and letting his eyes grow accustomed to the bright glare of the sun. Only vaguely was he aware of the ebb and flow of the town around him. He had the feeling that he and Sam Kazee were alone here in the world.

Sam Kazee yelled, "You think that gun scares me?"

Steve stepped down into the dust. "No."

"You're yellow, Harding! This is the chance I've been hoping for!"

Steve said, "You'll have your chance. Back to back. We'll walk away twenty-five paces. Then turn and fire. You count. Is that okay?"

"You're yellow, Harding!"

Steve walked out to the middle of the street. His face was calm. He knew that a crowd was lining the walks, but it was not important. Nothing was important at the moment except Sam Kazee.

And Sam Kazee looked at the crowd and down at his feet in the dust and then at Steve. The taunting grin slipped slowly from his face, and he wiped the back of his hand across his mouth. For a brief instant his soul looked nakedly out of his eyes.

Steve repeated, "You count."

They were standing back to back now. The crowd sought cover, melting away like snow in the sun. Sullenly Sam Kazee began to count.

Steve walked steadily forward, listening. His hand rested on the polished grip of his father's gun. He thought: *How does a man know?*

"Twenty-one . . ."

Soon it would be over. Since last night he had known this would have to happen.

It was the waiting that was bad, much worse than this.

"Twenty-three . . ."

Only a second more. "Twenty-four . . ."

And then Sam Kazee fired. He didn't wait for the final count. Steve was still turned away. The bullet clipped his ear lobe, sending a stinging pain through his head.

Steve didn't rush things. And he wasn't surprised that Sam Kazee had broken. That was Sam Kazee's way. Steve turned carefully, at the same time lifting his own gun.

Legs spread wide, Sam Kazee stood there. His face was contorted. Again he fired. The shot went wild.

Steve triggered carefully.

There was a puff of dust from Sam Kazee's coat, over the heart. His knees buckled slowly, and then he sprawled headlong in the dust of the street.

Methodically Steve holstered his own weapon. He touched his ear and then stared down at the blood on his fingers. For a brief moment the sense of unreality was strong. And he told himself: *Now I know.*

PEOPLE were yelling now, running toward the street. Buell Newbold stepped out of the Orient. Steve noticed that Newbold was alone. Where were Clyde Morehead and Marshal Hammer? Wordlessly Buell Newbold bent over the form of Sam Kazee. When he arose his face was twisted.

He said, "You win this trick, Harding. I didn't expect this. Sam Kazee was my best friend."

"Where's Teal Bascom?" Steve asked.

Buell Newbold smiled faintly. He shook his head. There was a look of shocked pain in his eyes.

"Long ago Sam saved my life, Harding. I've always owed him for that. He never could fight clean. He lived dirty and he died that way. But he was my friend."

Steve repeated, "Where's Teal?"

Buell Newbold was still smiling. "I'm

unarmed, friend. You wouldn't shoot an unarmed man."

Somebody called out, "You're through in Topango, Newbold!"

"Perhaps." Buell Newbold shrugged. Even now his arrogance stood supreme. "I'll be ready for you all. Maybe you'll get organized. My boys can stand you off—for a while, anyway. We'll take a lot of you with us before we go."

Steve said, "Your boys won't stand by you. They never do."

Again Buell Newbold shrugged. "I think they will. Good day, gentlemen."

He turned his back on the angry crowd and started toward the door of the Orient. For a moment nobody tried to stop him. His pride was like a wall. All at once someone let out a yell.

"Get him, somebody!"

The crowd stirred. At that moment half a dozen men stepped out of the Orient. They held leveled rifles in their hands. Buell Newbold's men. They kept the crowd covered while Buell Newbold stepped inside.

Ellen Traynor pushed hurriedly toward Steve. "You're not hurt?"

Steve shook his head and she went on breathlessly, "Under cover of your fight they took Teal Bascom out the back way. Marshal Hammer took him in a carriage. They knocked him out and—"

"Go on!" Steve said sharply.

"Teal lost his head. He lost a great deal of money, too. But he refused to sign over the bank draft. He claimed the cards were crooked!"

"Where?" Steve asked roughly, taking her arm. "Where did they take him?"

Ellen Traynor whispered, "I don't know. Steve, you're hurting my arm!"

There was the sudden sound of hoofbeats. Somebody said, "Syd Morton! Ridin' hell-bent!"

Syd Morton slid from the lathered horse. His clothes were still damp. Panting, he told his story. And in conclusion he said,

"Boys, lets get that meetin' started right now! We'll clear Buell Newbold and his gang clean out of Topango!"

With only part of his mind, Steve heard them talking. They would organize now—but it would be too late. Already the sun was sinking below the distant horizon.

Chad Owen gripped his arm. "We won't get organized in time to help Teal Bascom, maybe. What do you think?"

Steve shook his head. A mob would only hasten Teal Bascom's death. One man alone had a better chance. Suddenly he lifted his head.

"Where's Ellen?"

Somebody said: "You mean Flossie Flame? Why, she went back inside the Orient."

Somebody else yelled, "Look! They're barricadin' the damn place up!"

Steve felt torn in two. The safety of Teal Bascom lay in one direction—the safety of Ellen Traynor in another. Methodically he began to sort things out in his mind. Very likely Teal Bascom was in the greater danger.

His mind made up, he headed for the nearest horse. . . .

CHAPTER 5

Gunsmoke in the Orient

TEAL BASCOM lay face down on the dirty floor. He felt as if he had no stomach—just a head and some feet and only a vast sort of emptiness between. Pain had flamed and died and then flamed again so many times that he had lost count.

Somebody threw a bucket of water over him. Clyde Morehead said, "Haul him up again. He's still got a couple of more toes we can scorch."

Teal Bascom tried to fight. They jerked him roughly into a chair. His chin dropped to his chest, and somebody took a handful of his red hair and yanked up his head.

Clyde Morehead asked, "You gonna sign over that bank draft?"

"No. That game was rigged."

"That don't matter. Not now it don't matter. You want the loan of a pen?"

"No!"

Clyde Morehead sighed and said, "You're bein' difficult. That John Traynor guy was easier. We ain't got nothin' to do till dark, and that's half an hour. . . . Slim, do you reckon you could forge his John Henry?"

A tall, gaunt man said, "I don't like it. Not unless it's the only way."

"Well, then, Slim. Mebbe you better go to work on this jigger once more."

The tall man called Slim nodded. "Toughest jigger I ever seen. Well, we ain't worked on his right foot yet."

Marshal Hammer sat suddenly on a chair, looking away. There was a jug of whiskey on the floor beside him. Outside the tumbledown ranch house another man was standing guard.

"I don't like it," Marshal Hammer muttered. He had been repeating the same thing over and over. "I don't like it."

Clyde Morehead said harshly, "There's lots of things I don't like neither! I didn't like havin' the damned Syd Morton nosin' around today!"

"I don't like it," Marshal Hammer repeated.

"You go outside and see how Ben's makin' out," Clyde Morehead told him. "If he's hittin' the jug like you, he'll be blind as a bat already."

Marshal Hammer staggered to his feet. He went to the door, turned, grabbed the lintel for support.

He said thickly, "Leave him be! It ain't right treatin' a man like that. Buell Newbold finagled this job for me, but he didn't say—"

Clyde Morehead lifted his gun out of his lap and aimed it at the marshal's fat belly. His voice was still toneless. "Don't argue with me, Hammer. That's right, you yellow-belly! Get on outside now!"

Twilight was like a heavy curtain being pulled down across all the windows. Teal Bascom sat limply in the chair. Darkness fell swiftly.

The man called Slim said, "How about some light?"

Clyde Morehead told him, "Light it yourself."

At length the light came on. From outside came the sound of tipsy singing. Clyde Morehead said, "The lousy sons!"

"I don't like it neither," the man called Slim said suddenly. "That dame was nosin' around. Syd Morton got away and he knows what's up."

Clyde Morehead laughed. "Forget it. We'll get rid of Teal before they get organized."

"What about Steve Harding?"

"Sam shot him. I know Sam. Harding is the kind of guy who plays fair, and Sam is so crooked they'd have to unkink him to get him in hell."

Dimly, Teal Bascom heard Clyde Morehead arguing with the man called Slim. He knew they would kill him—whether or not he signed the draft. He'd always had a lot of fun playing up to his wild streak. Sure, a guy had to settle down some time, but that could come later. His old man was always yelling at him that he wasn't a kid any longer. That he ought to accept some responsibility. He had laughed at his old man's worry.

Now he had made a terrible mess of things. . . .

The off-key singing still came from outside. Clyde Morehead cursed and said, "To hell with it! Let's get rid of Bascom now. It'll be easier to forge his name than to make him sign."

"I don't like that either," Slim said.

"You don't like nothin'!" Clyde Morehead snarled. He paused, cocking his dark head. The sound of the singing had stopped. "Them lousy sons! Slim, go out and take a look."

In a moment the man called Slim was

back to report, "Passed out cold. Both of 'em. Lyin' stiffer'n planks on the ground."

Again Clyde Morehead cursed. "Let 'em be. Let's get rid of this jigger here. Grab his legs."

They carried Teal Bascom down toward the river. It was dark and very quiet. Teal Bascom tried to summon up the strength to fight, but it wasn't in him. Clyde Morehead said:

"Okay, Slim, let's drop him here. I'll tie a chunk of iron around his laigs. You get the skiff into the water."

After a moment the man called Slim said doubtfully, "The skiff ain't here."

"Don't gimme that!"

"Well, hell, Clyde. Come look for yourself."

There was a brief silence. Clyde Morehead stood there, contemplating. Suddenly the man called Slim ripped out a scream. There was a splash, then silence again.

Clyde Morehead drew his gun and emptied it in the direction of the yell. There was a muffled grunt, and then a gun flamed in return. Clyde Morehead turned slowly on one leg and fell across Teal Bascom's chest.

A voice came cautiously out of the darkness, "Teal?"

"Steve!" Teal Bascom gasped weakly. "Steve Harding!"

Steve approached. And then Teal Bascom was aware that Clyde Morehead was struggling weakly. Pulling a hideout gun! With his last bit of strength, Teal Bascom hooked his arm around Morehead's throat and jerked savagely downward. There was a hoarse gurgle and Clyde Morehead went limp.

Steve held a hand to his shoulder and said, "I laid out the two guards in back and set the skiff adrift. Morehead got me in the shoulder."

"I've been a fool," Teal Bascom said brokenly.

There was the thunder of hoofbeats coming closer. Wild Jack Bascom swung to

the ground, his men grouped around him. Wild Jack bellowed:

"Did we get here in time? Syd Morton told us where to find this place. You okay, Teal?"

When Teal nodded, Wild Jack turned to Steve. "I guess I owe you some thanks for this, Steve," he said fervently. "Hey, you've been shot!"

"I'm okay," Steve said. "Anything happened back at town?"

"Not yet. The Orient is barricaded. They're holdin' a meeting."

"Will your boys help?"

Wild Jack shook his head. "You got plenty of men in town. We got to be ridin'."

Steve nodded. It was only right. He asked, "Are you boys by-passing Topango from now on?"

Wild Jack Bascom bellowed there in the darkness, "You give us an honest town—we'll be back."

That was all Steve wanted to know. His right arm limp, he rode back toward town.

HE HAD left his horse tied farther up the street, and he paused in front of the Orient. The town was strangely quiet. No light showed through the barricaded windows of the saloon. From the distance came the faint sound of voices raised in argument.

A man came past and spoke out of the darkness, "Steve?"

Steve said, "Yeah?"

"There's a meeting. They're waiting for you. Is Teal Bascom okay?"

"He's okay. Tell 'em I'll be along shortly."

The man agreed and started to move away. Steve called out suddenly, "What's Newbold's bunch been doing?"

"Some of his men high-tailed it out of town," the voice said. "Don't know how many."

Steve listened to the man's boots tramp hollowly along the high board walk. Then the sound was gone and there was only the

grim silence once again. His mind touched only briefly on the meeting. It wasn't the way. Ellen was inside the Orient, and a mass attack was the worst way in the world of saving her.

The dust came up in puffs from the soles of his boots as he quitted the street. His tread was a measured cadence along the veranda of the Orient. From inside there was no sound. Steve began wondering how many men were still there. He held his gun



McCallum glanced triumphantly at the charred ranchhouse holding the grisly remains of the four Bolivars. . . . For now no one could dispute his absolute rule of the basin. No one, that is, except the . . .

GUN-GHOST OF THE CLACKAMAS

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awkwardly in his left hand. Taking a deep breath, he pushed against the batwings. They folded open easily.

For a moment he stood there in the doorway. Inside it was dark and quiet. Steve let go of the doors and slid quickly along the wall. The doors whispered shut. Nothing happened, and he took a couple of more crab-wise steps along the wall. His mouth was full of cotton.

A voice said quietly, "That you, Harding?"

Steve moistened his lips. "Buell Newbold."

He slipped to the floor as he spoke. There was no shot. Steve waited a long moment, then raised himself and lifted his gun. It was going to be an awkward way to handle a gun.

Buell Newbold's voice seemed to rustle. "I've been waiting for you. I figured you'd come. It's been a long wait. Did you get to Teal Bascom in time?"

"He's safe."

"The others?"

"Dead."

"Well, I'm not sorry."

There was a short silence. Steve could hear the man breathing somewhere in the darkness. Buell Newbold laughed bitterly and said, "I'm alone here. You were right. My men deserted."

"Flossie Flame?"

"She's John Traynor's sister. She told me tonight. I should have seen it from the first."

Steve said roughly, "What have you done with her? Is she all right?"

"Locked in a room upstairs. At first I had the idea of holding her for a hostage. When my men deserted I knew I was licked."

"Why didn't you leave with your men?" Steve asked.

Buell Newbold chuckled, without mirth. "I've been playing at being God. It's a losing game, Harding. I wanted too much.

I had half the town and I wanted it all. I have more money than I'll ever need, yet I wasn't satisfied with robbing a man of half of what was in his pockets. I wanted everything. Why did I do it?"

Steve said, "You'd do the same thing over."

Buell Newbold laughed drily. "A man has strange prides. And that's why I couldn't leave with my men. I can't stand losing. If I ran, how would I ever know which of us was the better man?"

A chair scraped. Steve turned his gun toward the sound.

Buell Newbold said, "I'm coming for you now."

Steve took a step forward. Then another. In the darkness Buell Newbold's foot scraped a table leg. Steve almost fired but caught himself in time. If he missed—he'd never have another chance.

They saw each other at exactly the same time.

Both guns hammered. Steve felt the shock of a bullet along his side. Another caught him in the leg. He dropped to the floor and came up on his elbows. Carefully he emptied his own gun, and the gun-thunder hammered and rolled.

Buell Newbold coughed in the darkness. His body fell across a table and the table overturned with his weight. Again he coughed. He tried to speak, but all he could make was a liquid gurgling sound. Then even that choked off.

From somewhere above there came a hammering and then a crash. Steve could feel his own blood spreading around him on the floor. Feet hurried down the stairs and then Ellen Traynor was bending over him.

"It's all right," Steve said. "The whole town will come running over here in a second or two."

"Steve! Steve!"

Steve smiled quietly. "Everything is all right now."

THE HERMIT OF SPANISH PEAKS

By DAVE CROCKETT

The sheriff had often wondered why old Ed had turned hermit. Now he wished he didn't know. . . .



He grabbed at my hand. "Don—don't do it!"

MY FATHER had been a judge, but when he looked down from the bench to the defendant he could see, beyond, twelve men who would share responsibility for the decision. I was only the sheriff of Madison County, but I could have used some help the night I had to pass judgment on the old hermit, Ed Davies.

I made my decision alone, and it wasn't easy. I'd like to know what you would have done.

I happened onto Davies' cabin in the Spanish Peaks by accident one fall eight years ago, and talked the bearded little fellow into telling me where to get my deer. His place was eighty miles from anywhere, and the last twelve were straight up. Well, we hit it off fine so the next time I went right to his spot, and the next time, and the next.

The old man never looked any different from year to year. His beard might have been a Van Dyke once, but by the time I knew him it was just a rim of ragged hair that met another rim of ragged hair at his ears. I always had the feeling that he was peeking through a gray muff. He could have been sixty or seventy-five, and he always swore at the nearest living thing. It was a friendly profanity though, just as the cabin was a friendly little cabin and the barn a friendly little barn, and the pasture a friendly group of green humps held in the half protecting arms of a pole fence.

That trip when all the trouble started, I remember I had brought the usual packages for Davies: candy, cigars, a bottle of whiskey, some food I knew he would enjoy, and three or four month's supply of the *Helena Courier*.

We had played our usual rounds of cribbage, after dinner, and I was doing the dishes while Davies went through his pile of old newspapers. He was barely visible in the big chair covered with so many papers, but he was audible enough.

"Here's one for you, Don. By hell, listen to this...." And he read with relish the story of something that had happened in Helena, always adding his own editorial comment, mainly unprintable. He went on babbling for a while and then, suddenly, I realized that he had stopped talking.

"What's the matter, Davies?" I asked. "Run out of breath—finally?"

He didn't seem to hear me. The paper

was a barrier between Davies and me, between Davies and the cabin, light, heat, and sound. I could hear him rattling the paper though. And I caught another sound, a mumbled oath, and then paper being ripped and shredded.

The heavy stillness that followed bothered me, so with a final flourish around the frying pan, I hung the dishtowel on a nail by the stove and turned to him. "All right, Champ, maybe I can beat you a round or two of cribbage in your weakened condition, or do you want to rest on your laurels?"

He was a long time folding the paper and moving over to the kitchen table. Our banter was forced as we played, so after the first game I complained of fatigue and went to bed.

I had never seen the old fellow in any mood but a gay and friendly one, and it disturbed me. It started me wondering again about the life he had led before he retreated from civilization.

By morning, Davies was his old self again. The oaths came in the old manner when I asked him where to get my deer. He told me, of course. And he was right, as always. Davies was always right where animals were concerned. He had just two interests in life so far as I could ever figure out. Inside, it was his precious deck of cards. Outside, it was the animals, who knew what a soft touch he was for food or help.

By eleven that morning I had a five pointer dressed and lashed to my horse. When I got back to the cabin Davies was off somewhere, so I sat down in his favorite chair and stretched my legs. I can't tell you why my eyes kept turning to that stack of newspapers, but they did. At first it was just a flashing thought, to look through the papers and see what was torn out. I did my best to resist the impulse but it nagged me. Finally, I crossed over to the papers and thumbed through them until I found the torn one. The upper right hand corner was gone from page five. I felt mean when

I did it but I jotted the date of the paper on a card in my pocket, Friday, September the sixteenth.

I brought more than deer meat from the Peaks that fall. I took with me, down the trail, a troubling picture of my friend Davies in a strange, unfamiliar mood. It worried me more than I cared to admit.

IN MID-MARCH I had to go to Helena on business, so I dropped in at the office of the *Courier* and told the girl behind the counter that I wanted to track down a story about a friend of mine. She led me through the noisy composing room and on into a vault-like place where the odors of dust and ink fought each other. I lifted the clumsy book she found for me, and turned the pages to September the sixteenth.

At the top of page five were three photographs: one large, and two smaller, with a story filling two columns underneath. The headline in big black type said, "The Balch Case," and underneath, "It Happened Before!" Under the pictures I read, "Dr. Leonard Balch, 37, (upper right) of Detroit, was freed last week on \$10,000 bail pending trial on charges of murdering Mrs. Garson Fleming, incurable cancer patient. He pleaded not guilty following the lead of America's other 'mercy-slayers'. The nation, after reading of the slaying, remembered two other such deaths. Mrs. Bert Morris of Harristown, N. H. (lower left) piped heating gas into the bedroom of her aged mother suffering from the pains of uremic poisoning. Dr. E. D. Hale of Helena, Montana (lower right) was indicted but jumped bail before his trial for murdering an inmate of the Dresden Home for the Aged by injecting air into the veins."

I looked again at the photographs, at two strained faces. The third, Mrs. Harris, was the only one at ease. It must have been a picture taken in some draped studio long before the frenzy of death had touched her. Dr. Balch looked tired but poised in his decision. If there was reason, here for

Davies' great agitation I suspected that it concerned the picture of Dr. E. D. Hale of Helena. Helena, Three Forks, the Spanish Peaks—all could be bounded by a hundred-mile compass. There was little in the blurred image of Dr. Hale to give me the clue I was seeking, but I knew that fifteen years would change this slight, dark-haired Dr. Hale in many ways.

The drive back to Three Forks was a long and lonely one. I drove with half a mind. The rest of it worried my problem the way the wind does a bunch of tumbleweed caught in a line fence. I tried to shake the suspicion. I had known Davies only a small part of his life. He had obviously had many friends back in his ribald years, and the picture could be of one of them. Or perhaps the old man merely had a strong feeling on the subject of "mercy slayings." It could have been a hundred different things, or so I tried to tell myself.

Still, it was an unhappy drive through the sharp, white mountains. I forgot Davies for a while during the miles and found myself trying to reconcile murder for mercy, but I couldn't. Ever since I could remember, the ancient code, "A law is a law until it is changed," had been my motto. My father had taught me well, and I remembered. He pounded it home with a great fist against his law books. I remembered him saying again and again, until it became a sort of chant, "Without law to guide us, my boy, life on this earth would be impossible."

I kept seeing those words printed across the three faces in the Helena *Courier*. I don't know how a thing like that affects most men, but to me it was like a mosquito bite in the middle of the back. You can't reach it and you can't forget it. I had to find some way to scratch that bite.

It was about the tenth of May when I finally made up my mind. Davies would be surprised to see me in the spring, but he had bragged about the cut-throat in Diamond Lake for years, so I could use trout-

fishing as an excuse. It was going to be the toughest call of duty I had ever made, but there wasn't any choice.

I took my time on the trip up to the Peaks that spring. Perhaps it was unconscious reluctance to hurry that made me lag along. It was almost dark when I opened the gate and led the horse into the pasture around the cabin. Davies wasn't around. Even the dog was missing. I dropped the tether and went up to the door. It was just latched, and looking inside, I could see that Davies wasn't far. Dishes were still on the table and the bed was rumpled.

I took the horse to the barn and took off the pack-rack, then carried my things into the cabin. It seemed strange inside without the old fellow there. I was afraid to sit quietly and think, so I got busy. When I had heated water over the fire, I did up the dishes and started coffee. I had just poured a cup when I heard the dog in the yard. He must have caught my scent because when I opened the door the dog was there alone.

Then the barn door rattled and I saw the figure of the old man in the dusk. The lantern was on the table. I lit it and hurried down to the barn.

"Don? What the hell are you doing here?" Davies was completely surprised, and he nearly knocked the lantern from my hand with his thumping and hand-shaking. "Am I glad to see you, you old vigilante! Come here with that lantern. I need help."

He led me to the nearest stall, and in the dim light I could see a blanket partly covering small bundle of light-colored fur. I lowered the lantern as Davies knelt beside the animal. It was a fawn.

"The dog found her in a clump of cedars and made so much racket barking that I went to see what it was." Davies was slowly pulling the little animal around in the stall, trying to straighten her legs out. He spoke as he worked, without looking up. "Her mother hasn't been around for a couple of

days by the look of things. Besides being half starved, the poor thing's got a broken leg."

The animal was stiff with fear, and I could tell by her breathing and the glaze over her eyes that she was nearly gone. I didn't know how to say it, after Davies had carried her Lord knows how many miles.

"Davies," I touched his shoulder as I spoke, "it's a damned fine idea, but you haven't a snowball's chance in hell of saving her. Even if you could fix her leg and keep her off of it for a couple of weeks, she won't eat. I've seen it tried before. Fawns just won't eat away from their mothers. I'll put her out of her misery."

"Don. . ." He stumbled up from his knees and grabbed at my hand. "Don't do it. If I thought I couldn't save her, I'd have finished her where I found her." He held my wrist for a long moment. "I've had a lot of experience, Don."

HE TURNED again to the animal and began feeling along her foreleg. "Looks like a simple fracture of the femur. Good thing she's weak from hunger. She won't be able to kick up much of a fuss."

There wasn't time to think, then. Davies tossed me orders in a soft, sure voice, never looking my way. There was a peg in the stall and I hung the lantern there. He told me where to find some long, light shakes left over from roofing the barn, and some leather thongs from his pack-rack. Once he called me to hold the fawn firmly against the straw, and I saw him working with quick, calm hands along the broken leg. He must have known exactly where high pain would begin, because he paused and said, "Hold her," before he touched the twisted break.

It seems like a long job, as I think back, but then it was swift and I had no feeling of time. I do remember that sweat covered my hands where I held the animal and trickled down across my face even in the chill mountain evening. I felt miles away

from the lantern's light, looking down on Davies as he worked, and my chest was cramped from the tension.

I had seen bones set before. You see everything leading a sheriff's life. But I'd never seen anybody work so fast without getting excited. While I held the deer and passed things to Davies, he set the bone and lashed the splints in place, holding her leg taut with her hoof clamped between his knees. She threw her last strength into a struggle just as the bones sprang together. Then she lay almost in a faint as Davies finished.

"We did it, by hell!" he said, and there was a bright joy in his voice. He moved his hand to the animal's head and I'll never forget the way he caressed the little hollow behind her ear. "Now if she's just not too scared to eat, we'll be all right."

I couldn't tell what it was he fed the fawn. It looked like a mixture of oatmeal, maybe with canned milk mixed in. While Davies forced spoon after spoon of it into her mouth, he talked to her for all the world as if she were human. Finally the fawn dropped off into a sort of exhausted stupor, and we covered her with fresh hay.

Neither of us spoke much while we fixed and ate dinner. I think he was silent because of the energy he had used up during that hour in the barn. I know why I held my tongue. I kept seeing two men as I remembered the scene: one, Davies with the deer; the other, a doctor I had watched one time while he set a youngster's leg using my desk as his operating table. The two scenes were almost alike: both lit by lanterns, both quiet, efficient; sweat rolling off two faces, two voices calling calm orders to me, two sets of trained hands working against pain.

I didn't sleep much that night. I heard Davies go out three times, each time explaining to the dog that it wasn't necessary for him to go along every trip to see the fawn.

The next morning I would have bet even money that the deer would be dead. But when we went down with another bowl of Davies' mush, she was not only alive but actually turning in the stall on her three good legs.

"Davies," I said, as he moved up cautiously to feed her, "I didn't think you could do it." And then with half a breath I added, "I'll bet there aren't many doctors who could do a job like that and get away with it." I stressed that word "many," just a bit, so he would know what I was trying to say.

He was busy coaxing the fawn to swallow bits of the food, but he paused and looked up at me and his eyes were steady. It was only a moment before he said, still looking straight at me, "Oh hell, Don, you don't have to be a doctor to do it, but I admit it helps." Then he turned back to the fawn.

I'll always remember Davies at that moment. He showed no fear, no remorse, no shame. And I'll never see an injured deer, or squirrel, or boy, or grown man, without wishing that Davies' hands were there to do the fixing. I knew they weren't the kind that ever made mistakes.

I MIGHT have been able to go on being the law-abiding sheriff of Madison County, but I doubt it. You can't spend half your life following the fine print in the law books and then one day say, "This is the exception that proves the rule. This is different."

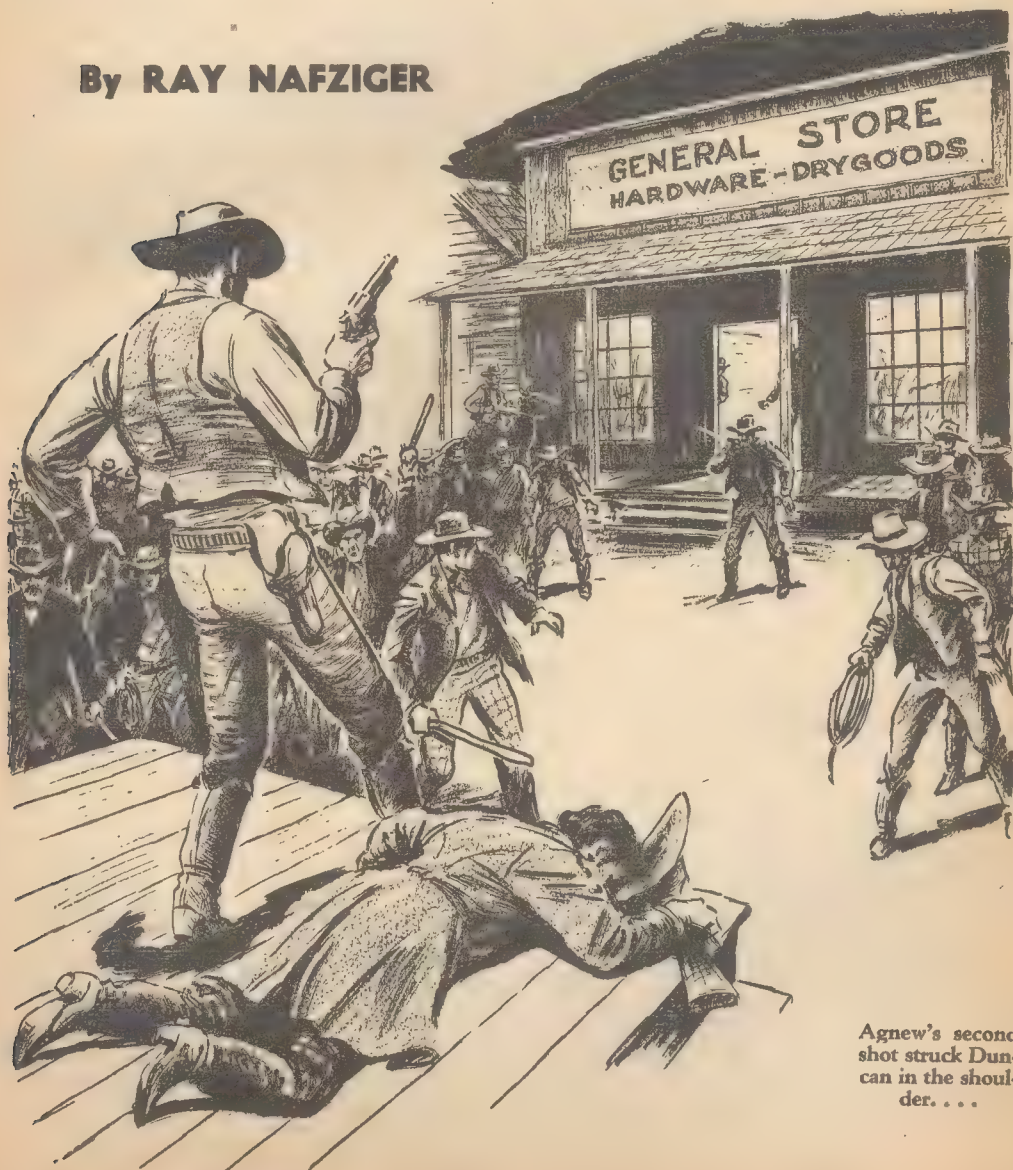
I know myself well enough to realize that my conscience would have bothered me until they fitted me for a coffin. Of course, learning the cattle business at forty isn't easy either. But it has one advantage. I get up to see Davies at least every fall and sometimes in the spring, too. And in the evening when I'm sitting across the lamp-lit table from him, playing cribbage and having a drink, it feels good not having to reach up to see if my badge is showing.

The Lost Lawman

TODD JACKS slipped into Marshal Jim Duncan's office, and Duncan saw at once that the dudish gambler had bad news. A little nervous man was Jacks, with small, dark features and a black brush of hair.

All Marshal Duncan had to do was stand back and let the howling mob lynch an innocent man. . . .

By RAY NAFZIGER



Agnew's second shot struck Duncan in the shoulder. . . .

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"Spill it," said Duncan, grinning, "so we can cry together."

"It's hell of a kind o' news to bring you on the first day of your new job," said Jacks. "Clay Agnew's been pardoned out of the pen. He's ridin' this way to kill you. Maybe he'll get in tonight; maybe tomorrow."

Jim Duncan looked at Todd Jacks reflectively, wondering what lay behind the worry on the narrow face of the little gambler; whether Jacks was more afraid of losing a friend or a livelihood.

An odd financial partnership existed secretly between Todd Jacks and Marshal Jim Duncan, who had rocketed to fame as a tamer of wild towns. People had noticed that wherever Duncan served as officer, the little gambler was always in the same place. But few connected the two men at all, and those who made guesses kept their mouths shut.

"Money bought Clay Agnew that pardon," Jacks went on. "Somebody put it up to git him out, knowin' he'd head first-off to kill you. I'm wonderin' who bought him out."

"What's the difference who put up the dinero?" said Duncan. "I'm not worried about Clay. I got a handcuff-leg-iron harness on him once."

"When you should of filled him full of lead! Jim, don't take this too lightly. Watch yourself; stay indoors. Agnew's a killer that never missed yet on endin' a man he started after. Meanwhile," continued Jacks, "I brung some good news, too."

From an inner pocket of his tinhorn's black frock coat he produced a sheaf of bills. "Five thousand," he said. "And only the start of what we'll make. This Dallart town was made to order for us. Just the right set-up with two big gamblin' outfits—Stott's and the Wayland brothers. I told 'em one would have to close up with you as new marshal, and that I was listenin' to bids. The five thousand is with the compliments of Gabe Stott—for exclusive gamblin'

privileges. And the Waylands is shuttin' down with nary a squawk. Pretty, eh? Big money for us, Jim, right here in Dallart."

Duncan did not reach for the money; he regarded it frowningly from his reddish hazel eyes. Quick and flashing, they saw everything within range. "This is my home town, like I told you a hundred times, Todd. When I was a kid, I used to dream of bein' marshal here some day. 'Duncan of Dallart', they'd call me. Now that I've come back as marshal, the folks I used to know, they're plumb tickled. And sort of proud of me. They expect me to clean up this town, Todd."

"And you'll clean it up. Plenty tinhorns and gunmen have already pulled stakes—scared paralyzed by you. This town will eat out your hand, but that's no reason why you shouldn't git more pay than your two-bit salary. Same as your other jobs. An' your old home town, booming like it is, is goin' to be a mint."

BOTH men looked out on the street, full of the stir of horsemen and rigs and big jerkline freight outfits.

During Jim Duncan's boyhood, Dallart had been a sleepy little adobe village. Now it was in the raw, roaring youth of a coming city. Cattle and sheep, placers and lumber were pouring yellow rivulets of gold into it, day and night.

"My home town, Todd," Duncan repeated slowly, and suddenly sighed. "I wish—but I'm damned if I know what I wish. No more than the fellow Pat Garrett killed at Stinking Springs. He died sayin' 'I wish—' without sayin' what."

Todd chuckled. "Easy to know what he wished. That he'd planted a bullet in Pat Garrett, 'sead o' Pat plantin' one in him. Same as you'll be wishin' you'd killed Clay Agnew before he killed you, if you ain't careful. It's your home town—so what? That's five thousand cold cash and more to come. Know any easier way t' git it?"

Jacks chuckled again, but Jim Duncan

oked at the bribe money and didn't laugh. He had needed money once for an operation that might save his wife from death. Todd Jacks had showed the marshal how to get it—by running out all but one of the gambling outfits in a rough mining town. The operation hadn't saved his wife, but since then Duncan and this dark little man had worked together, Todd as agent, collecting bribe money for what is cynically called "protection."

Duncan had salved his conscience by telling himself that getting rid of the small gamblers promoted law and order, and at the same time prevented a lot of the tin-horns from robbing drunken patrons.

Jacks got up to go. "Don't forget Clay Agnew," he said. "He's ridin' this way to kill you!"

And Todd went out into the street, along the shady side. The gambler had spent so many hours under artificial light that he didn't feel at home in the sun.

Frowning, the marshal picked up the money Todd had left and dropped it into the bottom drawer of his desk, as if glad to get it out of his sight.

A handsome man in his early thirties, Jim Duncan stood six-feet-one, with a rangeman's flatness of body. He was at the peak of his strength and speed. His eyes, red-hazel and with a glow of sun in them, seemed to burn with watch fires. The warnings of danger had brought him through twelve years of law-work, and more than a score of gun battles.

Vaguely troubled, Duncan went out to stroll along one of Dallart's new plank sidewalks, stretching along past stores and saloons almost to the river. The walks were broad enough so two hair-triggered men ran no danger of jostling each other.

The spring was at its height in Dallart, and the cottonwoods along the river were enormous green mushrooms against a red sunset. Behind them the black malapi hills tilted back to a horizon made by the cones of three volcanic peaks. It brought back to

Jim Duncan all of the springs he had known here as a boy, and suddenly he started to whistle. It was as if he had returned home from a long, wearisome, dangerous journey.

Near the last of the walk where the stores ended, he saw a woman and a ten or eleven-year-old boy ahead of him, and then suddenly a third figure. It was a range man, lurching drunkenly out from between two buildings. To the woman the man lifted his hat with exaggerated courtesy, and then as the two tried to pass, he blocked their way.

Duncan, hurrying forward, saw the youngster strike the man. Enraged, the fellow knocked the boy into the street with a backhand sweep. Then grinning, he turned back to the woman, but Duncan was on him, bending back the man's right arm as the fellow snarlingly went for his gun. Then, disarming him expertly, Duncan gave him a mighty shove that lifted the man through the air. The cowboy sprawled his full length in hoof-churned dust.

Lying on his back, jarred clear through his alcohol fog, he recognized Marshal Jim Duncan. And suddenly he became terror-stricken.

"Where's your horse?" Duncan whipped out.

"Ab Learner's stables, Marshal," gasped the man.

"Get it and get out!"

That command Jim Duncan had given to hundreds of men in various towns—to cowboys who had drunk too much, to undesirable characters. Few men had dared to disobey it; those who defied the order now slept under boothill headboards.

AS THE man shambled hastily away, Duncan had his first look at the woman's face, and was struck at once by the delicacy of her features, by her eyes that held in them the color of lilacs. As she turned from wiping the dust from the youngster's face, she glanced at him, and for both of them recognition was a spark

that spanned the gap of many long years.

"Tess Lanier!" he exclaimed. "Little Tess Lanier, the imp in pigtails." He remembered her as a light-hearted, mischievous little creature, the daughter of a rancher.

The smile that lighted up her face, the soft warmth of her hand meeting his, sent a glow through the marshal.

"Jim Duncan!" she said. "For all you're a famous marshal, you're still the same lanky, conceited kid who tried to boss the school, just as you boss towns now."

"But you're no longer Miss Tess Lanier, I guess," he observed with a side glance at the boy.

"You're wrong," she returned. "Bob's my sister's boy. You remember Alice? Little Bob lost her and his father, and now he's taking care of Mother and me. Bob, you'd like to shake hands with the famous Marshal Duncan."

The boy grinned in embarrassment, his eyes gazing at the marshal with a look that Duncan had seen often in boys' eyes before—pure worship for the Jim Duncan who was a tamer of roaring towns, gunman extraordinary, killer of fast gunmen who had shot it out with him.

"You'll come to see us some time?" Tess Lanier asked. "How would you like that, Bob—having such a great man in our house?"

The boy flushed and grinned. "Aw, you oughtn't to bother him," he said. "He's too busy to have time for us."

The marshal chuckled, and then sobered. The worship he had seen in the eyes of boys had troubled him more than once.

"You know Cal Everhart, of course?" asked Tess Lanier. "He came back, too."

"I know him," he said briefly. He and Cal Everhart had gone to school in Dallart, had been rivals for the leadership of their companions. Everhart was now prosecuting attorney for the district which included Dallart County. Meeting Duncan that morning, Everhart's greeting had been pretty cool. The jealous dislike the two had

felt as boys had somehow carried over into manhood.

"Cal was educated in the East," Tess Lanier explained. "He could have stayed there with a big firm of lawyers, but he came back. Just as you did." Our little Dallart is growing into a city, and the boys I went to school with are its leading citizens."

The eyes of the man and woman met, locked for a long moment.

"I've been wondering what made me so glad to get home, Tess," Duncan said. "It's meeting people like you again. Just to see you was worth coming back."

She could see the sincerity behind that statement. Jim Duncan had been married once; the death of his wife had left him with a loneliness that the years had never lightened. But when he said good-by to Tess Lanier and went back toward town, that loneliness seemed suddenly to have vanished.

He was in the center of the town when he heard the rapid crash of a six-shooter. It was coming from behind the white-walled front of the biggest gambling place and bar in Dallart—Gabe Stott's. Turning, he shoved swiftly through the door.

Gabe Stott's was a place of distinction, where no dance-hall girls cajoled men into galloping embraces over sanded floors. Stott offered only two things: no limit gambling and a bar with the best liquor. Everything there was run for efficiently carrying out the one purpose in the mind of the thin, hatchet-faced proprietor. That was to make as much money as he could.

Around one of the poker tables a little crowd had gathered. Pushing through it, Duncan saw a youngish rancher with curly blond hair lying on the floor. A sixgun was clutched in his hand, and there was an ugly hole in his forehead, and blood darkening his shirt over his heart from a second shot. A dealer, fattish and tall, stood across the table, smoke curling from the gun in his hand. That would be the killer.

GABE STOTT, predatory-beaked, bald and dressed in fine broadcloth, pushed in. "Evening, Duncan," he said suavely. "Too bad this happened your first day as marshal. It had to be done; a drunk went for his gun, and it was either kill or be killed for my dealer."

Men who had seen the shooting protested at that, and a rawboned man who had knelt over the body, raised his head. "It was murder, Stott," he said accusingly. "And I'm going to hang the man that killed him, even if he is your brother-in-law."

This was the prosecuting attorney, Cal Everhart, whom Duncan remembered as a gangling boy. Now he was a powerful man, with stern, smoky eyes above high cheek bones. He did not see the marshal; his eyes were fixed on the proprietor.

"You'll hang nobody," Stott said sharply. "It was plain self-defense."

The marshal bent beside Everhart, took the six-shooter from the hand of the dead rancher, punched out the cartridges. Two caps had been exploded, but the lead still remained in the cartridges. The powder had been removed. He examined the other cartridges; they too had been tampered with.

The attorney was watching him. "That proves it's murder," he burst out. "Marshal, arrest this man."

Duncan looked at Everhart coolly, the old hatred rising in him. "I don't take orders from you, Everhart. I'll 'tend to my business; you 'tend to yours. He'll be arrested."

"I'll have him out on bail before an hour," said Stott.

"We don't turn murderers loose on bail in Dallart," snapped Everhart. "Marshal Duncan can testify those useless cartridges were planted on this man."

"Don't go off half-cocked," snarled Stott. "The marshal can testify to nothing of the sort. He didn't see those cartridges planted—if they were. Maybe this rancher believed in carryin' cartridges without powder. Maybe they was sold to him for the real thing."

Everhart's face flushed red. "You're

smart, Stott," he said, "but your brother-in-law's going to hang. Men here will testify he caught your dealer cheating." He faced Duncan suddenly, a sneer on his face. "I take it, Marshal, you'll help in the conviction? Or are you going to help your friend, Stott?"

"I don't like your tone, Everhart," the marshal snapped. "This is no courtroom. Put me on the stand and I'll tell what I saw. I'm hired by the town of Dallart as marshal. When I turn this man over to the deputy sheriff, I'm done in the case, except as witness. It's your job to convict him. Here's your evidence." He handed the cartridges to the attorney, and disarming the dealer, took him off to the courthouse on the plaza.

Delivering his prisoner ended his duty in the case until the trial, and he returned to his office. There he found Todd Jacks waiting worriedly for him.

"Stott's been to see me," Jacks reported. "We got to get his relative outa this mess. That rancher was drunk. He oughta realized when he accused someone of cheating, he took a chance of gettin' killed."

"But he didn't realize his cartridges had been switched. It was cold-blooded murder," said Duncan. He looked out at the strong tides of the town flowing down the street. A horse's hoofs pounded past, and he glanced at the rider, checked off automatically that the man in the saddle was not Clay Agnew.

"Murder or no, Stott says we got to help him," argued Jacks. "Says he paid big for what he bought—our protection. We got to soothe him down, Jim; else he'll come out and tell how he's paid you off."

"He got no protection to kill, damn him," returned Duncan in sudden heat. "I never stood for killings. Gabe Stott's brother-in-law has earned a rope. Tell Stott to go to hell."

Jacks shrugged his shoulders. "Forgit it, Jim. There's other ways of fixin' it up. I don't like the way Stott's actin', either."

Maybe we should of closed him up and let the Wayland brothers run. But they didn't bid much, for some reason." Jacks stood up. "An' keep an eye open for Clay Agnew."

AFTER Jacks had gone, Jim Duncan opened the drawer; looked at the five thousand in bills still in the desk drawer. He saw it now as he'd never seen money like that before. It was unclean, stained with the blood of a murdered rancher. He had been hard hit by Tess Lanier; but that money lay between the girl and him, along with the money Jacks had collected in previous towns. Some of that, too, might have been stained with blood.

He slammed the drawer shut on the money, trying to shut off his thoughts with it. Making a round of the town, he gave orders to the deputy marshal for the night, and as tired as if he had ridden hard all day, went to his hotel room.

He was in a trap, and there was no way of fighting it. It didn't help him to realize that it was a trap of his own making, that he had sold his name and his office; the shame of it weighed on him, kept him awake. He lay listening to the hoof-beats of a horse in the street and wished that the rider was Clay Agnew, so he could buckle on his gun-belt and go out to fight something that had material substance.

Morning saw him astir early and on his horse, taking a ride along the river, through a light mist that shrouded the valley. Another person had the same idea of an early morning ride, for a mile out of town he met Tess Lanier, jogging a pinto mare along the bank. Seeing the girl again, with her smile that frankly admitted she was glad to see him, Duncan felt depressed and guilty.

"I heard about the murder in Gabe Stott's place," she told him. "And that you discovered the evidence that will convict the man. It's good to know that two such friends as you and Cal are fighting side by side."

He made a sudden guess. "Cal wants to marry you, Tess?"

She looked at him, grave-eyed. "Yes. He's wanted to for a number of years. I told him I wasn't sure, and he said he'd wait until I was. I admire and respect him, but those don't always add up to love."

The answer made him exultant for a moment. If she really loved Everhart, she wouldn't be waiting. She didn't have to know what Marshal Duncan had been in past years; he could return Stott's money.

"I knew," he said, "that there was something more than homesickness drawing me back to Dallart. There's nothing I wouldn't do for you, Tess. Is there—would there be a chance for me?"

She looked at him with a penetrating directness, but her answer was indirect, and given in a low voice.

"I heard last night that Clay Agnew is on his way here to kill you, Jim. I couldn't sleep, thinking of the danger to you. Is it true?"

"There's been a report of it," he stated. "But death is waiting for all of us around some bend in the trail. It's part of my work and not important, except that you worried about me." The tide of exultation in him swelled higher, and abruptly left him stranded.

Looking at Tess Lanier, Duncan knew too well what he had been wishing the previous day. He wished that he had come to Dallart with clean hands, that there never had been a money partnership with Todd Jacks. This woman could not be for him. Tess Lanier was too fine.

"I said I'd do anything for you. That might keep me from saying what's in my heart, Tess. I've lived in rough towns."

"If you're thinking of the men you've had to kill—to keep them from killing you and others—no one can blame you, Jim. You're no professional gun-notcher. The whole country respects you as a brave, honest officer. Cal Everhart might blame you for some things you've done; he's fanatical

on right and wrong. But little Bob doesn't give his admiration easily, and he likes you. So do I."

He shook his head; likely enough she would soon know there was more troubling him than justified killings of badmen.

When he returned to his office, he sat there in helpless inaction, feeling himself drawn deeper and deeper into a whirlpool.

Todd Jacks dropped in once, nervous, plainly worried. The dealer was being held for first-degree murder, and Stott was determined to clear his brother-in-law at all costs—even if it meant the end of his business in Dallart. It had to be fixed up in some way, but there could be no fixing when Everhart prosecuted.

"Between this thing and Agnew gittin' closer," said Jacks, "I'm bein' drove crazy."

Duncan smiled grimly. Clay Agnew's arrival—giving him an excuse for violent action—was something he'd almost welcome.

DARKNESS started Duncan on an early evening patrol of the bars and gambling establishments, in a town that seemed abnormally quiet and tense. It got through the marshal's shell of calm, made him irritable.

It was just past nine when, passing along a narrow street behind the old plaza, he heard the roar of a gun and the sharp, shrill cry of a woman. He turned to run across vacant lots toward the building from which the sounds had come, realizing suddenly that it was the little adobe office and living quarters of Cal Everhart.

There was enough moon to give fair light, and he had barely started running when he saw the back door of the adobe building open and a man slip out, to scuttle toward the cover of a lumber yard. For only an instant he saw the running man in the faint light of the doorway, but it was enough for Duncan's extraordinary sharp eyes. There was no chance to stop the fugitive, but the marshal would be able to pick him out from among the Dallart citizens.

He crashed through the door and through a little back room, and burst into the attorney's office. A young woman, a bedraggled creature in soiled cheap clothing, was lying on the floor, with one of Everhart's arms under her shoulder. Pouring through the front door came men—a doctor who was not needed; a lawyer, Crisson; and others. The woman had been shot and must have died an instant after the one scream Duncan had heard.

The marshal remembered having stumbled over something as he'd been running there. As he retraced his steps and went through the back room, he found it—an ivory-handled .45. The odor of freshly-burned powder came from the barrel. Then he came back quietly.

"Why, hell!" said Crisson, the lawyer, beefy of body, fat of face. "That's the woman who came to me this evening complainin' a certain man had got her into trouble. She named him, too—Cal Everhart. I told her he would take care of her, advised her to go to him. And this is the way our sainted prosecuting attorney looked after her—by shuttin' her mouth with a gun."

"You're a liar, Crisson!" burst out Everhart. "I never saw this woman before she came to my office tonight. A man shot her from my back room and ran out. I went to her help, instead of chasing him."

The flabby jowls of the lawyer shook as he laughed. "Expect us to believe that, Cal? But that's a reformer for you—killing a poor girl who loved him. He had to get rid of her to keep her from ruining his reputation. I see, Marshal Duncan, that you've got the gun she was shot with. Good work! That gun looks like Everhart's. Maybe somebody stole it from you, Cal?" he sneered.

"It's my gun, all right," admitted Everhart. "I keep it in a desk in the back room. You're Gabe Stott's lawyer, Crisson. You've rigged this to frame me—to make me lay off that case. You and Stott cooked this up."

"Ain't that a nice story?" said Crisson. "Tell it to a jury, if you get a chance. But a skunk like you ought to be given a rope and nothing else."

Everhart leaped at Crisson, swinging his fist at a pulpy jowl. Then Duncan stepped between the men.

"That won't help, Cal," he said quietly.

"But I tell you it's a frame-up! A man shot from behind my back!" stormed Everhart. "You came in from the back; you must have seen him run out the back door."

Duncan saw Crisson glance at him in sudden alarm, and he hesitated. If Crisson thought Duncan could identify the man, they'd get the killer out of the way before Duncan had a chance to capture him. So for the moment, Duncan had to let Crisson think the killer had gone unobserved.

And then, full between the eyes, a thought struck Duncan hard; no one knew he had seen the man. No one need ever know!

He had only to keep still, to make no search, and let Everhart be held for murder, or more probably be lynched. That way alone meant safety for him, for in the capture of the killer, the whole rotten mess Stott and Crisson had cooked up would be uncovered, with the full story of the protection Todd Jacks had sold Stott. Duncan would be tarred with the same brush. He'd be sent in disgrace from Dallart, condemned and scorned by all those who now admired him.

The showdown had come; he must choose trails. One—keeping still—led to marriage with Tess Lanier and the certainty of his position and the easy money that went with it. The other road—clearing Everhart—led to black disgrace, to ruin and exile. And for a few seconds that seemed hours, Marshal Jim Duncan stood, dazed, fighting within himself.

ACROSS his mind flashed, as in a parade, faces of people he knew. The echo of Todd Jacks saying, "Easy money. Big money." And his own boyish dream of be-

coming marshal here, of being known as "Duncan of Dallart." And then a ruthless voice within him was saying, "Don't be a fool; maybe you just imagined a man coming out of the back door."

He shook his head. He couldn't do it. So far, only, a man could go; no farther. He had traveled too far along the easy trail, the cowardly trail, but not too far to turn back!

"If I'd seen a man run away after a shot, I'd been after him, wouldn't I?" he said to quiet Crisson's alarm. "Come on, Cal; you'll be safer with the sheriff."

"You can't get away with this, damn you, Duncan!" said Everhart as the marshal delivered him to the adobe jail across the plaza. "A cold-blooded frame-up, with that poor girl as victim. I've got friends who'll stick by me, and at my trial I'll rip this dirty combination of you and Stott and Crisson wide open! I've got proof Stott gave you money. I had a man yesterday listening to your agent, Jacks, making the deal with Stott. You can't get away with framing me, Duncan."

"You won't ever give anybody credit, will you?" said Duncan. "Believe that I helped get this up if you want to, but it's stormin' up for worse than a trial. They want to be rid of you for good. There's a rope already slipping over your neck. The sheriff will have to rush you out of Dallart."

"Run away from a mob in my own town!" raged Everhart. "I'm damned if I do!"

"You'll be damned if you don't! The same slick heads that planned the murder will be planning your lynching. You've got to get out and give me time to clear you."

"Time to get rid of evidence in my favor, you mean. I won't go, I tell you."

"You've got courage, Cal," said Duncan quietly, "but that's no help. Sheriff, I'll go out and get horses for you and Everhart. There's no time to lose. Have him ready, out back."

Duncan saw men in the plaza as he went

out. Already restless currents of violence were flowing through the town. Free drinks would be pouring over Stott's bar and others. Many of Stott's kind would join in getting rid of the attorney. Stott had been clever; he had framed Cal Everhart with the one charge that would be sure to whip the town into a lynching rage.

Todd Jacks appeared before Duncan, blocking his path, in a high pitch of excitement. "He's here, Jim!" he said hoarsely. "I've had men watchin' at the stables for him. He rode in after dark and put up his horse."

"Who?" said Duncan, and without allowing Jacks time to answer pushed by. "I'm in a rush, Todd."

"But wait," pleaded Jacks. "Listen! Clay Agnew's in town. You got to go git him by surprise 'stead of lettin' him ambush you. Now's your chance, 'fore he shoots you from some dark alley."

Clay Agnew in Dallart to kill him! But Duncan brushed that fact aside. He had no time to worry about it now.

A crowd of men, carrying rifles, ran into the plaza. They rounded the courthouse, and overpowered the guards put there to see that Everhart was not taken from the little jail behind it. It was too late to try to rush him out of town.

"Jacks," he said, "Everhart's been framed. They're going to mob him. He knows we took money from Stott. He'll ruin us—but I've got to save him!"

Jacks caught his arm. "You gone crazy, Jim?" he demanded hoarsely. "Let Everhart look out for himself. You ain't his keeper. The sheriff is responsible for him."

Duncan shook his head. "All this started with us, Todd. He's innocent, and I'm the only man that's got a chance to save him. I've got more reason than you think to see him hanged—but I can't do it. Out of my way, Todd."

"How 'bout Agnew?" Jacks started to protest, but Duncan shook him off and hurried along the street. Friends might be

gathering to help Everhart, but not enough of them to keep back a mob. There was only one way to save Cal Everhart—to get the fellow who had fled from the back of Everhart's place.

HE SET out on a rapid search, through saloon after saloon. The killer would be mingling with the crowds; he would figure that safer for him than hiding.

The marshal shouldered men aside from doorways, snarled angrily if they resented it, and his set face kept back the curses that rose to men's lips. Duncan was a tiger on the prowl, with death in a slap of his paw. Everywhere he searched, he sensed a rising temper certain to burst in the faces of men gathering toward the jail. Rapidly he passed through the crowds in Stott's place, where the games had stopped and men stood six deep at the long bar. Stott's dealers moved among them, talking loud on one theme—the hanging of Cal Everhart.

The man he hunted was not there, and he hurried along the street again. The first tide was pushing toward the plaza, their voices an ominous overtone—a dark current of men, boots shuffling over the sidewalk.

In this shouting group he saw his man at last—like the rest of them, yelling for the lynching of Cal Everhart. Duncan dived into the crowd, took the fellow by the arm, slipped a gun out of a holster, and drew him into the light of a saloon front. The others marched on. The prisoner was a furtive-eyed fellow whose face had turned pale. There was no courage in him; there could not be in a man who would kill a woman.

Before Duncan could address a question, Todd Jacks rushed up. "Agnew's disappeared," he said. "He's somewhere in town, huntin' you. . . ."

Duncan did not hear him. "I got the rat who killed that girl," he said.

"Turn him loose, for God's sake!" begged Jacks. "It means the end of us if

you save Everhart. He'll run us out of town if we don't get hanged along with Gabe Stott and this polecat. Ain't you got no sense, Jim? Agnew's on the prowl. At least get your back to a wall so he'll have to come at you from the front."

"No," said Duncan.

"Then I'm washin' my hands of you!" yelled Jacks. "You damn half-witted fool!"

"Jacks," said Duncan, his voice steel-edged, "we've been partners. That's over. You've done a lot for me, and a lot to me. Get your horse and get out. If you don't, I'll kill you."

Jacks stared, his face turning to a rigid mask. "You mean that, Jim?" he asked. "Tellin' me t' get my horse and ride out? That you and me—we're through?"

"I mean it, Todd," said Duncan evenly. And he hurried his scared prisoner across the plaza and pushed him into the sheriff's office. There the sheriff and deputy waited with shotguns and rifles.

"I saw this man running out of the back of Everhart's yard," Duncan announced. "He killed that woman."

The prisoner's lips worked soundlessly until a frantic rush of words came out. "You couldn't of seen me; there wasn't enough light; it was too dark—"

And then he stopped. He had given himself away; he knew he was doomed. He went down to his knees pleading for his life; he talked—talked enough to put ropes around the necks of the men who had hired him, Gabe Stott and Crisson.

From the plaza came a burst of gun-shots and yells. Then a growling murmur that became the voices of many men, with the trample of feet as bass accompaniment.

"We can't stop 'em now, Duncan," said the sheriff. "Not that crazy mob. There's a bunch of Everhart's friends comin', but we can't hold out till they git here."

"Lock this polecat up," snapped Duncan. "You men stay inside. I'll talk to them. Lock the door behind me."

He stepped outside, through the door of

the jail, and heard the rattle of the bars behind him. Before him all the men in Daltart seemed rolling forward in a wave that would engulf the building.

The marshal stood in the darkness, while the crowd stopped in the square of light coming from a brightly lighted saloon across the way. Identifying Duncan, the crowd fell silent for a moment.

"Everhart—" he began, but a roar drowned him out.

"That's who we want!" one man shouted above the tumult. "How'd you guess it, Marshal?"

"Everhart," Duncan shouted, "never killed that woman. She was killed by a man who ran out the back door after the shot. I saw him and I've found him. He's admitted he was hired—"

Then Stott and some of his dealers started yells that drowned out Duncan's voice. One leather-lunged dealer climbed on a wagon and managed to make himself heard above the din.

"Duncan's stallin' to protect Everhart. They're friends; they went to school together. Hang the marshal, too, if he don't get outa the road!"

Led by the Stott faction, a portion of the crowd surged forward, to stop a few feet away from Duncan. He did not draw a gun to stop the movement; he did not need to. The marshal, standing there alone, seemed as immovable as a granite mountain wall.

The yelling became deafening; guns sent lead at the sky; a few bullets whistled over the marshal's head. Yet the crowd held off, pushing this way and that, hesitating to go against that granite figure.

On the edge of the mob, well toward the front, Duncan saw without much surprise Clay Agnew, the prison pallor still on him.

Agnew had found the surest place of ambush from which to kill the marshal—a crowd—and seeing the man, Duncan knew then that regardless of what action the mob took, he would never see the sun again. He was under a sentence of death, one that

would be executed whenever Agnew chose the moment.

Duncan raised his voice, trying to make himself heard, but it was useless. As he fell silent, he was aware that Todd Jacks had come up beside him, rifle in his hands, and was yelling at the mob. Jacks' high-pitched voice had a penetrating quality; the nearest men, caught by it, silenced those behind them.

"Listen to me!" Todd kept repeating until the uproar quieted. "I know the inside of all this. Everhart never killed that woman. One bunch of your Dallart gamblers had her killed to git at Everhart, and another bunch is tryin' to have Duncan killed. You all heard of the killer, Clay Agnew! The Waylands bought him a pardon so he'd come here to kill a square marshal. Just like the other gambler's outfit tried to get rid of a square attorney—I mean Gabe Stott's bunch!"

"He's a liar!" shouted Stott. "Come on, boys! Bust in that jail."

AFTER that, in the tumult of a crowd thrown into mixed battling elements, a locomotive whistle could not have been heard. Duncan, who had lost sight of Agnew for the moment, saw him again, standing a little apart, a sixgun in his hand. Even as the marshal started his draw, he knew he would be too late. Agnew leveled his pistol with the sure swiftness of a striking snake.

It was at that instant that Jacks flung himself in front of Duncan, and grunted under the impact of a bullet that struck him in the chest.

With one arm, Duncan swept Jacks aside so he could fire at Agnew. Agnew's second shot struck Duncan in the shoulder, but the marshal saw that Clay Agnew was out on his feet. The marshal wrenched clear of the shock of the bullet, fired again, and Clay Agnew collapsed, falling limply forward.

"Them damn Stott and Wayland gamblers is tryin' to kill Marshal Jim Dun-

can," bellowed a cowman. "Clean up on 'em."

Guns broke out, hurling shots at close range. Strong men screamed in agony and went down, clawing at the hard-packed ground of the plaza. A wild shot scraped along Duncan's head, and for the first time in his life, the marshal was out.

He awoke to find himself on the ground, stunned, dizzily trying to get to his knees. The shooting had stopped. The sheriff was outside with Everhart.

Staying on his knees by an effort, Duncan saw Jacks lying close to him—Jacks who had stepped in front of him as Agnew had fired. The little gambler was breathing heavily, and Duncan began shouting for a doctor.

Jacks shook his head. "No good," he said. "Marshal Duncan," he went on, speaking jerkily, "I got to tell you to go to hell—on that order to git my horse and ride outa town. Jim, there never was a man or marshal like you. You was always too good to run with the likes of me."

Still on his knees, Duncan lifted Todd Jacks a little. "Todd," he said, "why in hell did you take that bullet for me?"

"I owed that much and more to you, Jim," said Todd Jacks. "I got you into all this, an' wanted to pay back. . . ." His words trailed off; he was suddenly limp in Duncan's arms.

They had to use force to take Todd Jacks from Duncan, and then the marshal was out again. He awoke with the pain of his shoulder as it was being worked on by a doctor.

Cal Everhart was helping the medico. "It's all your town, Cal," muttered Duncan as the doctor finished. "In the lower drawer of my desk you'll find five thousand dollars. It's dirty money. You might see that it goes to the widow of that rancher who was killed in Stott's place. And Todd Jacks—see that he has a decent funeral. If it hadn't been for him, it would have been mine."

"And you?" asked Everhart.

"I'm gettin' my horse and gettin' out," said Jim Duncan curtly. Then he headed for his hotel room, to get his things.

The town was still buzzing when he walked by way of side streets to the stable where he kept his horse. Seeing the marshal's bandaged shoulder, the stableman saddled for him, and Duncan led the horse out. He found two people waiting—Tess Lanier and little Bob.

"You're not going?" asked the girl.

"There's one order I give men when the town is better off without 'em," he said. "Get your horse and get out! That's the last order I'm giving as marshal of Dallart—and it's to myself! I deserve it for throwin' in with a killer-gambler bunch."

Tess Lanier caught his arm. "You're not leaving, Jim," she said with gentle positiveness. "We need you here. This town is

your town. You fought for it tonight—not for the gamblers!"

"I think Cal Everhart might say different to that," he stated.

"But it was Cal that sent me here—to ask you not to go. He said you were going to leave, and that if you'd listen to anyone, it would be me. Will you listen? We need you here, Jim Duncan."

"You don't know what I've been before," he said wearily.

"It's the man you are now that counts," she said softly. "A man has the right to a fresh start—a clean slate—when he's shown he deserves it."

The girl put her arms around him, while the boy, his face one wide grin, led the marshal's horse back into the stable. And Jim Duncan knew at last he had really come home to stay.

WAR TALK

It is very common knowledge that the Indians who inhabited the Western part of the United States communicated with each other in wartime, on clear days, via campfire smoke signals. But this was far from their only type of "rural telephone" when one warrior wanted to tell another about how the battle was going. For example, he might throw two handfuls of dirt into the air, in imitation of the cloud of dust kicked up by a herd of stampeding buffalo. It conveyed a similar message, because it said in effect that the time had come to make a bloodcurdling charge. If the signaler had a horse, and rode it in a series of continuous circles on the summit of a hillock where he could easily be observed by someone "in the know," he was telling the onlooker that he had discovered a heretofore hidden band of the enemy. The larger the circle, the greater the number of men to be considered for skirmishing. When campfire smoke signals were resorted to, however, they weren't created, as is popularly supposed by covering the blaze for an instant with a blanket, then pulling it away quickly, to release a large volume of meaningful smoke. Although the Indian seems to be the original inventor of smoke signals, that method's pure fiction—at least as far as the Redskins of the short grass country were concerned. They resorted, contrariwise, to tiny individual fires. As soon as one had produced the desired quantity of smoke, it was killed with green fodder and another was ignited. When the two were permitted to burn in unison, creating a twin banner, that meant, "Fortune has been good."—B.W.



ROUND-UP

By THE EDITOR

WHAT in tarnation do you reckon the old Forty-Niners would say if they knew that folks nowadays can cross the continent overnight—reclining on the soft seats of a contraption called an airplane, with pretty girls to coddle 'em and serve 'em hot meals?

I don't imagine they'd believe any part of it, for things sure weren't like that when the West was born! Our hardy pioneer ancestors, in fact, would never recognize the continent now, with its railroad tracks and criss-crossing roads and airfields every few miles. When they made the great trek, there weren't even stagecoaches or trains—just the vast, endless plains stretching on forever, with lumbering covered wagons inching painfully along.

Those old ox-drawn Conestogas were slow, cumbersome things. Ten miles a day was about as good as they could do—a distance we think nothing of driving now for a pack of cigarettes! Yet those heavy old wagons kept rolling on, day after day, while

men cursed and sweated and wished to hell there was some way to make them go faster. Then one day a man came up with an idea—perhaps suggested by the name folks gave those wagons, prairie schooners. Our friend Allan K. Echols tells the following tale about Old Man Thomas' fabulous experiment with a honest-to-gosh ship of the prairie. . . .

It was to be a great day for Westport, Missouri, and for the whole West. History was on the point of being made on that spring morning, a hundred years ago, when Old Man Thomas unveiled his prairie schooner. This new method of transportation would cut the traveling time of a wagon train from Missouri to Santa Fe from three months to five days! And it would eliminate the need for the slow-moving and expensive horses and mules.

Old Man Thomas was a genius; he had thought up the idea of putting sails on his wagons and letting the wind blow them from Missouri to Santa Fe! The wind

blew ships across the ocean, didn't it? It drove feed mills and water mills, didn't it? And there was always a good stiff wind from east to west along the old Santa Fe trail, only waiting for some smart man who would harness it and put it to work.

So Old Man Thomas organized the Westport and Santa Fe Overland Navigation Company, an impressive organization, and they built themselves an impressive sail-rigged freight wagon to make a trial run.

This big prairie ship was built like a wagon; it was 25 feet long, and sat on great wheels twelve feet in diameter, twice the height of a tall man. The body was covered with canvas like a conventional wagon, but on the front end there was built a high deck, up to which ran a steering wheel from the front wheels of the wagon. Protruding upward through this deck was a mast twenty feet high, from which could be unfurled great stretches of white canvas sail, while outriggers ran outward on each side, as runways for the three men it would take to handle its sail.

When this great history-making vehicle was ready and rolled out into the streets of Westport, replete with its green paint and white sails, it was a sight to see. Crowds flocked in from miles around, from as far away as St Louis, for indeed here was to be the beginning of a voyage that would rank with those of Columbus and other great navigators.

Being venturesome men, the spectators oiled their tonsils with the proper medicine and made a picnic of the occasion, filling the streets with arguments and betting large sums of money on the merits of the contraption which Thomas claimed would sail the 780 miles to Santa Fe in five days! Not ten miles a day, but a hundred and fifty!

The stockholders in Thomas' Company had originally been sold on the idea to the point of putting up the necessary money to build the thing, but some of them were beginning to sweat under the collar. They

heard so much ridicule and hooraw about it that they figured they would be laughed out of Missouri if the thing didn't work. But they had their money tied up in it, and they publicly at least had to show faith in their investment.

Old Thomas knew that he was going to succeed. He had the wagon rolled out onto the prairie and headed West, followed by the yelling and excited crowd. The stockholders came along with tight-set mouths, determined to see it through. People laughed at Columbus, didn't they?

The history-making moment had arrived. Old Thomas announced that the trial run would be made to New Santa Fe, a small village about three miles west of Westport. They would not haul freight on this test run, but the stockholders would be accorded the honor of riding the world's first wind-driven prairie schooner.

A great shout went up, mixed with hoots of derision and wisecracks from the excited throng. The stockholders crawled into the great body of the wagon and took their seats. Old Thomas climbed up over the great twelve-foot wheels to his place.

"Off to Santa Fe!" Old Thomas gave the signal, and the three prairie sailors hoisted the great expanse of white canvas. The east wind bit into it and bellied it out. There was a strain and a creaking in the rope rigging, and the prairie schooner was off on its maiden voyage. The crowd yelled and tossed their hats into the air; the big wheels lumbered on their axles, the great body heaved in its bolsters, and the stockholders, feeling their dream come to life, waved their hats at the envious crowd.

The big green wagon picked up speed, and left its crowd of admirers behind. It was working! It would move! Now it was moving faster than a freight wagon ever moved before. There was no limit to its possible speed!

Thomas stood on the bridge of his schooner and beamed a smile of vindication

(Continued on page 112)

By DE WITT NEWBURY



That was how it happened
that seven ragged, weather-
worn trappers went to Mon-
terey. . . .

SEVEN SONS OF SATAN



CHAPTER I

Welcome to Monterey!

WHISTLING as he worked, Tone Magee stitched the buckskin skillfully with awl and sinew. He was finishing a new shirt. Woman's work, but the squaws in this country were a poor, unhandy lot.

It was hell's own powderkeg, there in old Monterey—with the Spaniards' nerves tuned to a hair-trigger pitch, the Russians plotting an empire . . . and seven hairy mountain men a-honing to strike the spark!

He was squatting under a live-oak. Behind him was a shanty of logs and brush. Behind that, scores of beaver pelts were curing on the hillside, each one stretched on a willow hoop.

The other men were down in the near-by coulee, handling half-broken horses and mules. Tone grinned through his whiskers as he listened to their shouts and laughter.

Things were going well, he thought. Everybody was stout and sassy now, and they had caught a mortal lot of beaver. Yet—not so long ago—the seven trappers had crawled out of the mountains like gaunted ghosts. Frozen and starved, with most of the animals dead and eaten.

They had come all the way from the Salt Lake country, following the trail made by Joseph Walker the year before. Trying to follow it, at least. They had found Ogden's River, then the Battle Lakes, where they had fought off a swarm of Digger Indians. They had reached Walker's Lake and struck up the western river.

After that the way had been through a wild, high hell of ice and snow. Food had given out, and there was no game. Mounts and pack-stock had died of sheer misery. Their stringy meat had kept the trappers going.

Only mountain men could have crossed the Sierra, and few had made the journey before those seven. But the seven had made it.

They had saved four mules, four loads of precious traps and trade goods. At last they had tottered down the final steep—and found warmth instead of cold, food instead of starvation, heaven instead of hell. California!

And now they were in this great valley, full of almost everything. Rushing streams, meadows of tall grass, groves of unfamiliar trees. Herds of elk and black-tails, giant bears.

Only there were no buffalo; that was a disappointment. But there were beaver in great plenty.

Yes, Tone's party had been lucky. They were rugged again from eating game meat. They had caught all the plews they could handle. They'd even laid hold of riding and pack animals.

He finished the shirt, and pulled it over his bushy head and lean shoulders. He belted it snugly, slung on his powder flask, bullet pouch and cougar-skin possible sack. Then he fumbled for his stone pipe.

Instead of lighting it, he sat staring out over the valley, toward the river. Something was moving through the long grass, between clumps of timber. A line of black dots. Mounted men.

He raised a war-yell. "Hi, boys! Goin' to have company! Leave them critters an' come a-runnin'!"

THEY waited on the hillside, a crew of buckskin scarecrows. Hair down to their shoulders, beards down to their chests. Rifles cradled in their arms.

Chocky old Barrel Jones and tall Gander Millan. Georgia Jack, a Cherokee who despised all western tribes. Reckless Billy Be-dam', Canny McLeod, and Scalper Dupree, the wild Frenchy from Vincennes.

And, of course, their captain. Tone Magee was the tallest and toughest of all. His eyes were blue slits and his beard rusty red.

The riders came on at a lope. Nearer and nearer, until they rode up the hill in single file. Tone counted twenty swarthy *soldados* with an officer in the lead.

They halted. The officer was a limber young fellow, black mustached. He wore an old dragoon helmet and a blue coat with frayed gold lace, but his boots were handsome and his spurs silver. The men carried long lances. Flat hats were thong-tied under their chins. Their tight jackets were shabby, their leather leggings wrinkled over rawhide sandals.

Tone had learned a little Spanish at Santa Fe. "*Quien es?*" he asked.

The officer saluted politely and answered

mostly in English. "*Señores!* You are *Americanos*, I see. I am *el Teniente* Ignacio Martinez, and I seek stolen animals—fifty, a hundred. Perhaps you have seen them?" His eyes flickered to the right, toward the gully where mules and horses were picketed.

"Why, now," Tone allowed, "we traded critters from some tame Injuns a while back."

Martinez grew excited. "Those *Indios* were *renegados*, runaways from the mission! They stole the beasts—not wild and worthless, but of good breeding!"

Tone scratched his whiskered jaw. "Might be. We bought 'em cheap, for beads an' a few knives."

"I must take them."

The trapper spat and wiped his beard. "Reckon not, *Teniente*. Tell ye what! Get us back our trade goods from the Injuns, then we'll buy the critters from *you*."

The lieutenant glanced at the seven hairy, leather-faced, leather-clad men, each nursing a Hawken flintlock. Then at his twenty, with their lances and slung carbines. He turned back, scowling.

"Have you the passport to enter California?"

Tone slapped his rifle. "Right here."

"Have you the permit to hunt and trap?"

Once more Tone slapped the rifle stock. "This is it."

Martinez rose in his stirrups. "I must arrest you," he declared, "for illegal entry to the Province! I must take you all to Don Jose Figueroa, the governor!"

Tone Magee chuckled. "Try it!" he said. "Just go ahead!"

A moment's hesitation; then the officer pulled out his sword. The lancers didn't charge; that would have been sure death for seven at least. They spun their horses and scampered downhill, deploying as they went.

At the foot of the slope they dismounted, thrust lances upright in the ground and

unslung their clumsy carbines. Each stood behind his horse, aiming across the saddle. Martinez leveled a huge pistol.

"Do you surrender?" he challenged.

There was no answer, Tone being busy with directions. "Cover the livestock, you four, but hold yer fire. Bar'l an' Scalper, stay here. Shoot if the sodgers does. Not to hurt, 'cause we ain't real mad yet. Just sorta bark 'em."

The four trotted left to the gully's rim and dropped prone in the long grass. Tone stepped behind the oak tree. Barrel and the Frenchy took cover behind the cabin, each at a corner.

From down the slope came booming reports. Clouds of smoke rolled up. The soldiers had fired their ancient carbines, the officer his pistol. Bullets tore through the oak branches and whacked into the log hut.

Tone squinted along his rifle barrel and squeezed the trigger. Three rifles cracked together.

The lieutenant's helmet jumped from his head. A soldier dropped his carbine to clap hands to his split hat and bleeding scalp. Another called on saints and angels as he flapped a grazed arm.

Reloading, the three trappers waited.

"*Señores!*" Martinez was waving his sword again, but this time a white handkerchief fluttered from the point. "Let there be no more bloodshed! Let us discuss matters like *caballeros*, not savages!"

"Suits us!" Tone shouted back. "Come on!"

Martinez trudged up the hill, helmet in hand. He looked at the hole in it and said proudly, "We have fought as brave foes, now we meet as brave friends. *Es verdad*, I have liking for *Yanquis*."

"No Yankees here," Tone countered. "Me, I'm Pennsylvany Irish."

"Ah!" Martinez looked perplexed. "But there are *Americano* merchants in the town; they are *Yanquis*. Besides, I befriended *el Capitan* Walker, a *Yanqui*."

Tone grinned. "Well, now, that's different! Though Joe Walker's no Yankee, either—hails from Tennessee. I know him well! Matter of fact, I got a letter from Cap'n Walker to your boss, the gov'nor."

The officer beamed, too. "*Bueno!* Then all is well. You have but to come with me to Don Jose. He will give you the permission to visit our province and hunt. I will have done my duty, while you will be obeying our law."

For the first time old Barrel Jones spoke, his voice rumbling like a keg over stones. "Where we gotta go? D'ye reckon to herd us fellers along just like a bunch o' tame jackasses?"

Martinez pointed westward. "We cross the river, *amigo*, the San Joaquin, and journey to Monterey. A beautiful city by the sea! There are fine dwellings, fruitful gardens, a harbor for ships. Oh, it is a place of civilization!" He put one hand on his heart. "On the honor of a *caballero*, you shall be treated as guests."

"And what," Tone asked, "about them hosses an' mules?"

A shrug, a wave of the hand. "All will be arranged. You have furs. No doubt the merchants will buy some; then you can make the good fathers a small gift, *si?*"

THEY were in a sort of squeeze, Tone judged. Might chase these soldiers away, but only to fetch a bigger army. Weren't ready to move out yet, either; hadn't smoked jerky enough for the back trail.

He turned to his men. "We oughta fix up this trouble. S'pose I go an' give my letter to the gov'nor? I'll take a couple loads o' beaver along. You fellers can be shootin' deer and makin' meat."

The men were free trappers, each with a right to speak his mind. Canny McLeod was the first. "Na, na, we must stick together!"

"That's right," Barrel rumbled. "It's strange country."

"If one goes," Georgia nodded, "we all go."

Billy Be-dam' crowed, "We'll see the Western ocean! A big town! Spanisher gals!" He elbowed Scalper, and the wild Frenchy whooped.

"Good enough," Tone agreed. "Sho, I'll enj'y to see a ship agin! Ain't see'd one since I was a pup, an' my daddy took me to Philadelpy."

So that was how it happened that seven ragged, weather-worn trappers went to Monterey, riding half-broken horses, leading a string of pack-mules, and escorted by a troop of lancers. . . .

They were surprised when they saw the place. They had expected such a town as Santa Fe. What they found was a straggling village of adobe houses and wattle huts, overlooking an almost empty harbor. Yet a crowd of people had turned out to meet them.

A few were mounted dandies, wide-hatted and velvet-jacketed. Most were lesser folk: villagers, farmers, fishermen, Indian peons and mixed-bloods. They seemed too lazy to stand upright; they slouched or leaned against mud walls.

The real welcome came from another quarter. There was a stir and bustle around a long adobe building behind the town, a mounting of horses. And here came another company of lancers, to surround the already surrounded trappers!

It seemed that Martinez had sent a courier ahead, and they were expected.

They sat their tired mounts, helplessly hemmed in by soldiers and townfolk. Something was happening behind them—lead ropes were being cut, the pack-train broken up! Their mules—with the fat packs of beaver, even the traps—were being led away!

Tone kicked his pony's ribs, tried to break free. No use; the mob was too thick. No use to use his rifle, either, against so many.

"What's this?" he barked. "Have we

gone and shoved our paws into a trap?"

Martinez was beside him, soothing, explaining. "No, no! We will care for your property. The furs must go to the Custom House—a formality only—until you have seen the governor."

So that was it! Maybe there was trouble ahead, maybe not.

He'd think it over. Meantime, the jabbering crowd had thinned around the seven trappers. With one accord they urged their horses down to the harbor and swung to the wet sand of the beach.

Barrel caught up a handful of frothy surge, raised it to his mouth. "It's salt, sure 'nough!" He spat it out. "Not as strong as the Big Lake, back east, though. Guess we're nigh as far west as we c'n git without swimmin'."

The others tasted and spat, then bared their shaggy heads to the breeze. "Even the wind is salted!" Billy Be-dam' marveled.

Tone looked at a vessel at anchor, a tubby, square-rigged three master. "There's the ship I been a-honin' to behold!" he said, and swore. "'Tain't like the tall, purty ones I see'd at Philadelpy!"

They found Martinez waiting when they rode up to the town again. He led them to an old, crumbling adobe building, into the weedy patio. "You are guests," he bowed. "This is your home, with all provided."

"How 'bout seein' the gov'nor?" Tone demanded. "Gettin' our plews an' traps back?"

"*Mañana*," Martinez shrugged, "or next day. Repose yourselves in peace, *señores*!" He cantered off.

The trappers swung down from their ponies to scout the place. The patio was enclosed by galleried wings, small rooms opening off them. There was a well in one corner, with a rawhide rope and leather bucket.

"I been in worse camps," Tone decided.

He stepped out through the tunnel-like entrance. A dozen idlers were clustered

around outside, and they stared with black, curious eyes. He saw no guards there. But the barrack building wasn't far away; a squad of soldiers stood before it, facing his way.

"If we ain't in the *calabozo*," he grunted, "we're almost there!"

Before long some welcome gifts began to arrive: food, forage and firewood. Indian peons drove in burro after burro, loaded with bundles of cut grass, dry sticks, sacks and baskets.

"Fresh-killed cow beef," Barrel tallied, "a mess o' green truck, bags o' meal an' beans." He lifted a fat pottery jug and sniffed. "Somethin' wet, too. Smells hefty!"

"We'll do," Tone said. "Tie the hosses to the posts yonder. Make our fire here in the middle, spread our robes around it. We'll keep the rifles handy, too. Ain't sure o' these Spanishers."

CHAPTER 2

Fandangos and Foofaraw

THEY were not disturbed, however. They had finished breakfast next morning when a visitor strolled into the patio. Smoking in the galleried shade, the trappers eyed him silently.

A gentleman in a fine straw hat, white coat and pantaloons. He had a shrewd, good-natured face, with clipped side-whiskers.

"Joshua Preble," he introduced himself. "In business here—agent for ship owners—and mighty glad to see Americans."

Tone shook hands. "Reckon we're glad to see you too. Ye must be one o' them Yankee traders we heer'd about."

"Right, sir. My ships sail from Boston, clear around the Horn, and carry back hides and tallow. But I hear you're in some difficulty, so I'd like to offer my assistance."

"We'd be obleeged!" Tone explained the

trouble; their mules, furs and traps had been snatched away, and they were quartered under the eyes of fifty soldiers. "Looks like we been foxed," he ended.

Preble pinched his shaven chin. "Your mules have been impounded," he said, "against the mission's claim. The skins will be held for payment of duty, and until cleared by issue of entrance permit and license for hunting. The traps, too. I'm on good terms with Don Jose Figueroa, so I can help you there."

"I'm mortal glad o' that!" Tone declared.

The other trappers echoed his sentiment with growls and curses. "Because," Barrel rumbled, "we'll sure as hell take some Spanisher pelts, if we don't get our beaver!"

"They've left you the horses; that's a good sign."

"Couldn't 'a' got *them* without a fight. We was on 'em."

Preble shook his head. "Do nothing reckless! You'll be watched, but you won't be under arrest if you're peaceable. In the meantime, you'll need money. I'll pay a good price for some beaver, as one of our ships can freight it cheaply. Just give me an order for so many packs, in exchange for Mexican dollars, and I'll chance getting the stuff released."

At this new friend's suggestion, Tone went with him to settle the business.

They passed dark-eyed women with jars or baskets on their heads, brown children playing in the dust, sleeping dogs, and citizens who leaned against their houses, *cigarillo* smoke curling from under their wide hats. Now the bay was in sight; Tone jerked a thumb toward it.

"The ship yonder?" he asked. "One o' yours?"

Preble laughed. "Lord, no! None of mine are due for a while. That pirate is from Russian America."

"Rooshian America!" Tone was puzzled. "Never heer'd of it."

"It's a long way north. Their chief post

is called Sitka, quite a town by all accounts."

A ship's boat was pulled up on the beach, amongst the fishing boats, and several seamen stood beside it. Blocky men in heavy clothing, in spite of the heat. They wore leather boots under belted frocks, and fur caps over bearded faces.

"Greasy fellers," Tone commented. "Us boys scrabbled through the Sierra snow with less clo'es than them. Didn't get so dirty, neither." *

"They eat grease and drip grease," Preble agreed. "They're outlandish brutes, though they make no disturbance in town. That's because of their captain. He's a remarkable man. Educated."

Tone was still curious. "What're Rooshians up to here?"

The merchant laughed again. "What are *you* up to? They are licensed to hunt sea otter down the coast, and they came in to declare their catch. Oh, yes, they obey the law! They bring ashore forty or fifty skins for inspection, and pay duty on them—while everybody knows they have twice as many hidden aboard ship."

"Then why don't the sodgers search the ship?" Tone reasoned.

"They could try, if they wanted war. The ship has four guns that could knock the town to pieces."

"Too bad," Tone mourned, "our beaver was in plain sight aboard them mules!"

They went on to Preble's home, one of the better houses. There was more talk, over glasses of fiery *aguardiente*, and Tone signed an order for two packs of beaver.

His possible-sack was heavy with silver when he rejoined his men. He shook it, so they could hear the clink, then emptied the dollars on a spread robe for division. "Now ye buy a Spanisher foofaraw!"

"A rainbow belly-sash for me!" Scalper yelped.

Georgia's choice was a fancy jacket, and Billy Be-dam' crowed about *cantinas* and girls. But old Barrel squinted at his money.

"D'ye trust this obleegin' feller? I was raised at Harrod's Fort, Kentuck'. Down there we reckoned a Yankee trader was pizen."

"He's straight as your shootin'!" Tone insisted. "Didn't hafta buy no skins from us. Coulda bought 'em cheaper from the gov'ment, after they was confiscated."

"Confiscated!" Barrel swore. "High hell, that means grabbed! Say, let's sneak out tonight like Injuns an' confiscate our mules. They're bein' grazed on the flats, only a few *vaqueros* to herd 'em. Then we'll bust that mud-pile Custom House an' confiscate our stuff!"

The others were listening, scowling now. They were free trappers; if they voted to fight, they'd gladly fight the whole province.

It was a case for argument. "After that what?" Tone asked. "Make tracks for the mountains, hey? Well, the *Californios* has prime hosses, and they ride better'n us. They'd run us down afore we reached the river."

Silence, except for a threatening mutter.

"Keep yer lousy shirts on, boys," he urged, "until we see what c'n be done. I'm takin' my letter to the gov'nor after *siesta*. Mister Preble fixed it. You *hombres* ramble off an' scout the town. Only don't get too rough, nor too drunk."

THE meeting with the governor was a disappointment. His house was the largest in town, on rising ground at the western end. A fort-like structure of adobe, with narrow grilled windows and an iron-studded door.

Tone and Preble reached it as the hot sun was sinking. A sentry gave them a tired salute, and a withered old Indian major-domo swung the door open. Before they could enter, two men stepped out.

The first was Ignacio Martinez. His face was high-colored, as if flushed with anger, and he gnawed his mustache. The second was a solid figure in belted coat and visored cap. He had a yellowish beard, eyes like

two bullets. He seemed to shoot them at Tone before he passed on.

"The Russian captain," Preble murmured.

Trapper and merchant followed the old servant into the patio. A place of flowers, shrubs and pillar-climbing vines. Table and chairs were set out, and the governor was pacing back and forth.

Don Jose Figueroa was slender, with a darkly pallid face framed by black whiskers. He was stiff in a military coat loaded with gold lace.

He turned to them. "At your service, señores."

Then came an interruption. A girl hurried from an inner doorway, her slippers tapping. She stopped short in confusion at sight of the visitors, and curtsied with spread skirt. She had dark curls to her shoulders and the longest eyelashes Tone had ever seen. The biggest eyes, too, he thought when she looked up.

"I present my daughter, the Señorita Clara Isabella Josefina."

The governor had barely spoken, the others had hardly made their bows, before she had vanished. Yet Tone had caught a flashing glance.

"Laughin' at me, bless her!" he muttered. "She sure shines!"

Don Jose clapped his hands. An Indian servant brought a straw-wrapped flask, and the three men drank sweet wine. Then Tone handed over his stained and crumpled letter. It was written in Spanish; not too good, from the way Figueroa frowned over it.

At last he laid it aside. "I rejoice to hear from *el Capitan* Walker, whom I much esteem. I grieve to learn of his misfortune."

"Bushed by northern Injuns," Tone nodded. "Most of his men kilt."

Don Jose began to speak, too rapidly for Tone to follow. He spoke for several minutes, gesturing with a thin hand. Then Preble translated.

"His Excellency says that he, himself, favors Americans. He will extend every possible courtesy to your party. Unfortunately, the provincial laws are very strict. He stretched them for Captain Walker, and has been censured. Hereafter he must obey his orders from Mexico.

"Foreigners are forbidden to enter California without passports. They must have special permits to remain here. They must have licenses to hunt or trap.

"It seems that your party is without official sanction. His Excellency cannot, on his own responsibility, issue the necessary documents. He must send a report to Mexico and wait for higher decision.

"In addition to all this, the Mission of San Gabriel has made a claim against you for certain horses and mules; or for their value, which is placed at the usual price of sixty dollars, Mexican, a head. There is also, of course, the duty to be paid on your furs."

Tone opened his mouth to bellow objections, but instead gave a windy sigh. "Anything else?"

"Yes. His Excellency assures you of his kind regard. He invites you to attend the *fiesta* next week, in honor of his daughter's Name Day. There will be a ball for the gentry, a *fandango* for the people, with much eating and drinking."

"Name Day!" Tone growled, then he laughed. "If she got all them names on the same day, it oughta be a high old celebration!"

He was glum enough, though, after the interview. The trappers couldn't wait while messages were sent to Mexico and back. That would take all summer! And they'd had enough of the Sierra in winter; they must start home before the snow was deep.

Preble was still cheerful. "Don't blame Don Jose. His government is anxious, and no wonder. British are pushing down from Fort Vancouver, Russian spies are prowling the coast. And now Americans break in from the east! Californians are afraid of

too many foreigners—afraid they'll overrun and take the province."

"Hell an' gunpowder!" Tone rasped. "They better be afeared! My mountain men are half grizzly and half catamount. They're all set to scalp the sodgers an' bust the town!"

"Keep them quiet," Preble advised, "until I can talk the governor around. Today he had something on his mind, besides your affairs. That Russian has been bothering him. After the ruffian has sailed away, Don Jose will be more reasonable."

"Mebbe so," Tone allowed.

It was a bad jam, he allowed to himself. His party was all tangled up; they had even lost the traps, the tools of their trade! They'd been coaxed here, too, where they couldn't put up much of a fight.

Well, he'd led them here. He'd get them away again, none the worse, or bust his guts trying!

THE *fiesta* was a grand affair. Fires blazed around the governor's house, where steers and sheep were roasting. Jars of wine stood along the wall, with gourd dippers handy. Guitars strummed, castanets rattled and drums thumped. The whole town ate, drank and danced.

Inside the patio, things went more sedately. The women—plump or slender—whirled slowly with swinging skirts, hands on hips or waving mantillas and spread fans. The men circled them, posturing. Tallow-fed lamps flared all along the galleries.

All the trappers were there, toggled out in Spanish "foofaraw." They were disappointed; they had expected, as Billy said, "to snatch the gals an' swing 'em." All but Tone slipped away to the outer grounds, where the *fandango* was livelier.

Soon Tone heard familiar whoops. He hurried out, afraid of trouble. But no, his boys were capering around a fire in a Crow war dance, while the Californios clapped and laughed.

Back in the patio, Don Jose met him with a warm greeting and led him to a gallery. And there sat Clara Isabella Josefina, with silky curls and eyelashes, bright cheeks and bright smile.

"The savage man!" she shivered. "I am affrighted!"

It wasn't real fright, only pretended. She wasn't really shy, either. She kept him beside her for a long time, answering questions.

He told her all he could remember about Philadelphia and St. Louis, then of forests and plains, rivers and mountains. Until young Martinez came to beg a dance.

Watching, Tone reckoned they made the best couple of the lot. "Go it, *Teniente!*" he called. "My money's on you two!"

A hard voice spoke beside him; not unpleasant, but with a ring of metal in it. "Indeed, sir, there is a fine woman."

Turning, Tone saw a visored cap and a blond-bearded face. "Howdy," he drawled. "See'd ye before, mister. My name's Magee."

Lamplight gave the Russian's eyes a pale glitter, without expression. Yet his manner was hearty; he didn't seem the ruffian Preble had called him. He said, "Sir, I am Konstantin Zenkov. I have been wanting to talk to you—I have met so few Americans. The language, I learned it in England."

His speech *was* a bit queer, Tone thought. "First time I ever met a Rooshian," he answered. "Ye been to England, too! I've knowed Britishers enough, Hudson Bay men a-trappin' our grounds."

The captain touched his arm. "You are a fur hunter who knows all the great inland country, and how to cross the mountains. Come, let us find a big jug of brandy!"

Again Tone told of long trails and far hunts. Sitting on a bench, this time, with a fat flask in his hand. The flask went to his mouth often, jaw work being thirsty work.

Then it was empty, the Russian lurching to his feet. "Enough for tonight," he said. "I must get to my ship before I am too

drunk—ha! Visit me tomorrow, good friend. A boat will come for you when the day grows cool. I'll show you my vessel, and some skins of the sea otter."

"I'll come," Tone promised. "Never see'd any sea otter. An' I'd sorta like to set foot on a ship."

The night was passing. Servants were setting out fresh lamps—bowls of melted tallow with flaring wicks. Still *caballeros* and their ladies circled in the patio, crowded the rooms where food and wine were waiting. The music still throbbed in the air. Shrill screams and laughter came from the outer grounds.

Feeling a bit sleepy, Tone shook himself. The captain was gone and another man—Martinez—was sitting on the bench.

The lieutenant dropped his patched helmet to run a hand through his damp black hair. "I saw him with you," he accused, "that free-booter from the north. A scoundrel! And I cannot challenge him to the *duello*, because Don Jose forbids! Though he too is outraged, he must be the diplomat. He must refuse the barbarian with courtesy!"

Tone blinked awake. "The Rooshian seemed a fairish sort."

"Ah, you know not!" Martinez groaned. "What think you he wishes from us, besides the sea otter? He wishes a woman! Young, handsome and well born! He bargains for a wife!"

"Them fellers trade for their women," Tone yawned, "like Injuns?"

"He makes great promises. The lady who consents will be like a queen, with honor and wealth. He is of the high nobility. There are Russian women in Sitka, but none good enough."

"Sounds fair," Tone commented.

"Fair?" Martinez bristled. "For a daughter of the Church to wed a Muscovy heathen? For a daughter of the sun to dwell amid ice? And you have not heard the worst."

"Guess I can stand it."

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"The barbarian has dared to cast his eyes on the Señorita Clara!" Martinez pounded his breast. "My heart's blood, my life!"

Everybody had trouble, Tone reflected. The boss of California was bothered by foreigners, yet had to act polite. This lad was bothered about his girl, and couldn't do a thing.

It was no trouble of Tone's, though. He reckoned he'd sneak back to camp and roll up in his buffalo robe.

CHAPTER 3

Buckskin Man at Sea!

THE boat was beached and two stumpy sailors were waiting. They stretched tarry hands to help, but Tone was used to trickier craft than this. He cat-footed over the bow, balancing as if in a canoe.

He was alone. He had left the others snoring in a long siesta after their night-long frolic.

The boat skimmed over smooth water. There was no wind, but some was coming, Tone judged from those clouds in the north. He was weather-wise, if he didn't know the sea.

Now the ship's side loomed above him, with tackle dangling down. He didn't wait to be hoisted; he jumped like a cat and swung over the bulwarks, rifle in one hand. Firm-footed on deck, he looked around.

The deck was splintered and stained, cluttered with barrels, bales and rope-coils. Penned goats bleated amidships, chickens moped in coops. There were four rusty cannon on wheeled mounts.

He looked at the lumpish men who were lounging up forward. A big crew. He counted twenty before Captain Zenkov claimed his attention.

"To my cabin! We will have a real Russian drink." Zenkov motioned toward a hulking man. "My mate, Igorovitch."

The three went down a steep ladder, to the stern cabin. Things were different here. It was cleanly scrubbed, with a huge bear-skin underfoot, a neat bunk and painted lockers. A sword and two pistols hung on the bulkhead; muskets were racked below.

A table was set with squat bottles and glasses. Zenkov poured out a water-clear liquor. "To our friendship!" he toasted.

Tone sniffed, then gulped. "Hi-ee!" he whooped. "Don't look much, but it sure tickles! 'Most as good as Taos lightnin'."

"Vodka of the best," Zenkov nodded. "Another?"

After several more he reached into a corner and laid a long, deep-furred skin in front of Tone. "The sea otter," he said. "The most wonderful skin in the world."

Tone examined the glossy, dark brown fur. "Never see'd the like," he admitted. "These here otter are big. Long as a man, I bet, from snout to tail-tip."

"Better than your beaver, eh?" Zenkov smiled.

"That's accordin'," Tone said cautiously. "Beaver's for prime feltin'. What's this for?"

"For fine cloaks and garments, to warm kings and queens and lovely ladies! One skin is worth fifty beaver." He filled the glasses again. "Now we talk."

He talked about his northern country. The best game country in the world, he said. There were bears bigger than grizzlies, moose, elk and countless herds of caribou. Salmon crowded the rivers.

"Any buffalo?" Tone asked.

Zenkov didn't answer that. "We have gold. The savages bring it to us in skin bags. They will trade a fortune for a trinket."

"Dunno 'bout gold," Tone hiccupped. "'Druther have buffalo beef." He'd take some of this liquor back to the boys, he thought. The lazy varmints didn't know what they were missing.

He was feeling right chipper, though the

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third bottle was nearly empty. The captain's tongue was pretty well oiled, and the big mate was swaying on his locker. That fellow hadn't said a word, had only grunted and kept drinking.

Zenkov refilled the glasses. "My friend, I make a proposal! Such a man as you—who knows the wild American land, who could tell much and act as guide—would be useful to my government. You could earn great honor, great wealth. If you would serve our Czar, the greatest emperor in all the world!"

Tone's head cleared suddenly.

The captain waved a hand widely and went on. "Russia is the most powerful empire! She has moved eastward, always eastward, until she has reached America. She will not stop!"

Tone gave him a slit-eyed stare. "Easy, there!" he drawled. "Everything o' yours is the best in the world, by your say-so. Furs, country, emp'ror! Well, Cap'n, I don't take wages nor order from nobody, an' I go where I damn please. By high hell, a free trapper has the best freedom in the world!"

A moment of silence, then Zenkov spoke regretfully. "I hoped to take you back to Sitka. I am disappointed. Yet we are friends." He looked across at his mate. "Igorovitch must be getting on deck."

The mate lumbered up, bear-like in the small cabin. He stumbled past Tone, steadying himself with a hand against the bulkhead. Tone twisted on his locker.

He wasn't quick enough. Maybe he'd swallowed too much liquor, after all.

Tone had his rifle between his knees, but couldn't bring it up in time. He saw the mate's big hand clutch one of the hanging pistols and swing it high. He flung himself sideways—too late again.

The long pistol barrel rang on his rifle as he tried to fend. Then his skull exploded with a burst of flame, like a keg of powder. . . .

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HE MUST be in a Mandan earth lodge, he thought. It was dark and stifling hot; full of the stink of skins, human dirt and rancid grease. His head hurt, too. The Sioux had scalped him, and friendly Mandans had brought him in.

But the smell was wrong. Too much fish and salt, no tang of wood smoke.

He began to hear noise through the ringing in his ears. A lot of noise. Stamping and shouting overhead, rumbling and clanking.

Then he remembered everything—and remembered another sound. Had he heard it in a dream, or when half awake? “*Santa Maria! Madre mia! Padre! Ignacio!*” A woman’s voice screaming.

His thoughts veered to the boys in camp. If they had come with him, if only Barrel had come, this wouldn’t have happened.

Well, Tone could manage alone! He rolled out of the bunk. The light came from a lantern hung from a beam, and he was in a narrow place lined with bunks. The forecastle of the Russian ship.

It was empty now, except for one man who squatted by the ladder. A broad lump with slanted eyes and a puggy nose. He held a sort of iron bar in his fist.

Were they taking a mountain man to sea? The footing heaved and slanted under Tone as he pawed for a weapon: No rifle, no knife! The squatting sailor started to rise, shaking the iron pin. He gabbled, “Nyet! Nyet!”

Tone made a running leap, and one moccasined heel caught the Russian’s greasy chin. The guard’s head snapped back against the ladder.

Next moment Tone had the iron. He whacked the sailor’s head, just to make sure, then yanked the fellow’s knife from its sheath. Though shorter than a Green River, it would do. Iron bar in one hand, knife in the other, he ran up the ladder.

There was daylight above. Dawn had brought the north wind, and the ship had



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weighed anchor. It was coming around slowly; a man was at the wheel and others aloft, shaking out the sails.

The wind died, still puffy and uncertain. Voices bawled orders, and there was a more distant, more clamorous yelling. Tone looked shoreward. He saw people on the beach, men and women. Black heads and wide hats, brown faces and waving hands.

Four fishing boats were being rowed out with frantic effort. They were full of soldiers. Cavalry at sea!

There were sailors along the ship's side now, with muskets. They knelt behind the bulwarks. A scattering volley crackled, smoke billowed up. Bullets whipped the water around the boats.

The rowers—fishermen—promptly jumped overboard and swam for shore. The soldiers milled in the rocking boats. They began to shoot, but the carbine balls fell short.

War had begun, and it was Tone's war! He padded to the nearest kneeling sailor, unnoticed in the smoke and uproar. In a minute the sailor had a broken skull, and Tone had his musket.

It was clumsy, but he'd make it talk. He crouched beside one of the rusty cannon and looked for a good mark. The steersman back there!

Before he could aim, the man slumped down in a heap. The wheel spun, the half-loose sails flapped, the ship broached. And from shoreward came the crack of a rifle.

Somebody was bellowing orders. Another man jumped to the helm, only to trip and sprawl across the first. A third got his hands on the wheel—but let go and dropped, to roll across the deck. Three times the rifle had cracked!

"Mountain shootin', by glory!" Tone muttered. "Old Bar'l's shootin'!"

The soldiers were rowing awkwardly, back out of range. The people had scattered from the beach beyond. But there were up-turned boats lying there, and men behind

SEVEN SONS OF SATAN

the boats. Fire streaked across the keels; thin puffs of smoke rose.

A fourth Russian was crawling away from the wheel, crippled. And now sailors began to drop from the rigging. Man after man slammed to the deck or plummeted into the water. Ashore, the rifles cracked.

The wind was gusty now. Unsteered and with flapping sails, the ship was drifting fast. Drifting ashore, broadside on.

Two cannon pointed shoreward from this side. Men began to work with them. The farther one roared and belched smoke. Its ball plowed water between two retreating boats, skipped like a stone, cleared the beach and knocked tiles from a town roof.

They were loading the other gun, the near one. Ramming a bag of bullets into this. "No, ye don't!" Tone grunted. He came out of the hatch, whirling his empty weapon.

Taken in the rear, the gunners went down. One, two, three! Another fired a musket point-blank at Tone's face; he dodged, and the blast only singed him.

This was the big fellow, Igorovitch! Tone dropped his own battered musket and flicked out his Russian dirk. He pushed it under the mate's red beard, hard and deep.

The mate fell on hands and knees. His beard grew redder.

Tone knew something of cannon, the ones at Fort Laramie. He slashed rope lashings with his dripping knife; by main strength he dragged the heavy carriage back and turned it. He picked up the smoldering linstock.

Then he saw Zenkov. The captain was standing by the mainmast, sighting a pistol at him. Tone whooped, "Hi-yi-ee!" He had the biggest gun, and aimed just right! He touched it off.

The cannon roared, bucking back like a crazy iron horse. When the smoke cleared, the mast was scored and splintered. The captain wasn't there!

The war ended suddenly. The ship



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BIG-BOOK WESTERN MAGAZINE

grounded with a jar, and the next thing Tone saw was a swarm of soldiers piling aboard. Then here was Ignacio Martinez, flourishing a sword and jabbering. "Dios! Where is she? Where?"

Tone jerked a thumb toward the cabin.

When he saw young Martinez again, the lieutenant was carrying Clara Isabella Josefina in his arms. She was fainting, with head on his shoulder and silky curls streaming. Yet she was smiling quite happily.

THE whole story came out later. Tone was in camp, enjoying a breakfast of roasted beef, while the others enjoyed looted vodka.

Old Barrel emptied a bottle. "Didn't bother us when ye didn't get back yesterday. We figgered you was makin' a night of it with y'r furrin friends. This mornin', though, all hell busted loose in town.

"There was shootin' by the water, so we nat'rally ambled down for a look-see. What we see'd was that ship makin' off—with you on it. But the folks there was hollerin' about the gov'nor's gal.

"Seems the furriners had busted through her winder an' snaked her out, real smart. Only they wasn't so smart with the *duenna* that was sleepin' there too. They giv' her a knock on the *cabeza*. Sho, a clouted head didn't keep that old squaw quiet! She come to an' raised the roof.

"Well, the sodgers was tryin' to stop 'em and not gettin' nowheres. So us fellers jined in an' done it."

"By glory!" Tone chuckled. "First time mountain men ever caught a ship!"

Later still they received a visit from Don Jose Figueroa. The merchant, Preble, was with him, smiling a shrewd and satisfied smile.

Don Jose threw his arms around Tone.

"Same to you, Gov'nor!" Tone wriggled free. "Any Rooshians left over?"

"They resisted arrest," Don Jose answered gravely, "so they will trouble us no

SEVEN SONS OF SATAN

longer. The ship is being unloaded. It will be towed off the bar and sunk. In Sitka they will never know. It will only be another lost vessel, a mystery of the sea.

"For you, *amigos*," the governor went on, "I have good news. You have saved a daughter of the Church from heathen bondage. Therefore the Mission makes a gift of certain mules and horses.

"You have also done me—and my Province—a great service. For that I release your impounded furs and traps. I grant you passports, everything!"

Tone shook his hand, avoiding another embrace. "Couldn't do handsomer!"

Don Jose exchanged glances with Preble. "There is more. We took many sea otter skins from the ship. You must accept a share. A token of gratitude from the whole Province of California."

"I'll buy 'em, if you like," Preble put in.

Grinning, Tone shook his head. "Reckon we'd rather pack the furs back, 'stead of Mex dollars. We'll have somethin' to show, and a tale to tell."

He paused. "We'll *vamos* from your blessed province," he added, "and thank ye kindly. But there'll be more *Americanos* comin', now we've found the way. Wouldn't wonder if they came to *stay*!"

THE END



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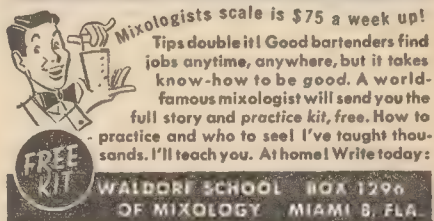
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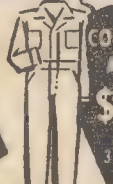
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BIG-BOOK WESTERN MAGAZINE

(Continued from page 93)

at the men who had had faith in him. He visioned wealth and fame; he saw great fleets of white-sailed schooners rolling across the seven-hundred-mile sea of grass, carrying commerce to Santa Fe, returning with its gold and silks and furs.

Old Thomas forgot his stockholders. Seeing the trail reeling off beneath his wheels, feeling the jolting and bouncing of the speeding ship, he turned all his attention to his job of steering. He had never traveled so fast in his life, and he began to worry about all this speed. And still the wagon wheels rolled faster and faster and faster.

The stockholders were undergoing the same experience; at first it was an unusual pleasure to ride so fast across the prairie. Then it began to look dangerous to them; a man could go too fast. They felt fear crawling up in them, and they didn't want any more of it. There was apparently no end to the acceleration of this wind-driven monster.

One of the stockholders climbed over the tailgate and dropped off into the road, rolling a few feet as he hit the ground. His panic spread to the others, and one after another they began crawling over the end-gate and dropping off. It was a great honor, and all that, but after all, who wants to be aboard a runaway monster that might never stop?

MEANTIME Old Thomas stood on his deck, feeling the wind whip his face, feeling the exhilaration of a speeding vehicle under him, tasting the delights of fame and fortune. His idea had been sound; the wind would carry a wagon; there was no need for mules on a freight line.

But his idea was so good that his wagon was going too fast.. It was bumping too much; it could turn over. It was time to slow down a little, to get this monster under control.

Thomas shouted over his shoulder, giving orders for his hands to lower some of the canvas, to cut down on the power that was driving him so bouncingly over the prairie. Again he shouted, and still again, and still the canvas did not drop; still the wagon picked up momentum.

He gave a moment from his steering the bouncing vehicle to look over his shoulder, and then his heart sank. His crew had left him; he was alone on his runaway freighter.

A mile back he saw his crew and passengers in a huddle in the road, watching

him disappear over the horizon; they had deserted him in his time of need, and he was alone on the monster of his own creation.

Then, looking ahead, Thomas saw a thing which had not entered into his calculations up to this minute. And it was too late now. He was racing toward the steep bank of a creek which crossed the road. There was no bridge across the creek, and there was no way to turn or stop his wagon.

Just as the cliff of the creek bank came rushing to meet his wagon, he happened to

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remember something else: On the seven-hundred-and-eighty mile trip to Santa Fe, there were many rivers to cross, and there was not one bridge across any of them.

The schooner hit the bank of this creek and sailed off into space. It landed in a heap of broken junk down in the creek bed, where the crowd that followed found old Thomas unhurt, but badly shaken up.

They expected him to be cured, but he crawled out of the wreckage with his face beaming. "That proves it!" he shouted. "We can use the wind to carry us to Santa Fe. I'll start building a fleet of these things tomorrow."

But the stockholders had different ideas. Still sore and bruised from their hasty disembarkation from the runaway schooner, they wanted no part of the venture.

Nor did anybody else. Old Thomas died trying to sell his idea, but there were no buyers. Everybody had had a good time, but they didn't want to invest in the business. And you can't revive an idea that has been laughed to death.

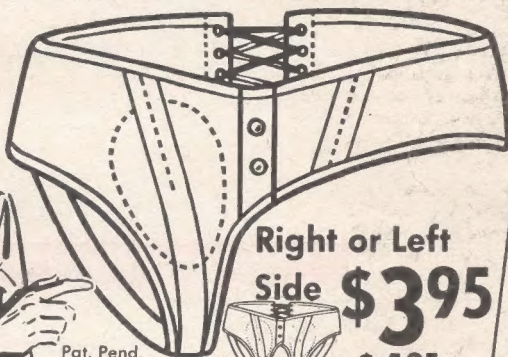
Actually, the idea of a wind-driven wagon might have worked in a limited way if it had been properly handled. In theory it would have been a cheap way to move heavy cargoes over flat, windy land, had there been bridges built to accommodate a wind-driven vehicle, but having died from laughter, the idea stayed dead until it was no longer needed at all. . . .

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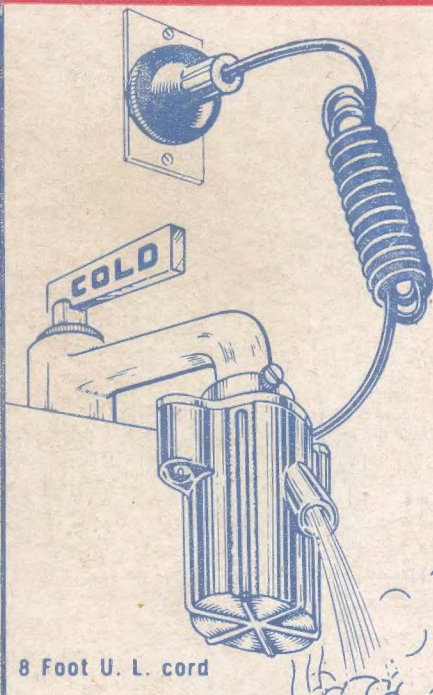
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